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FAMOUS WESTERN

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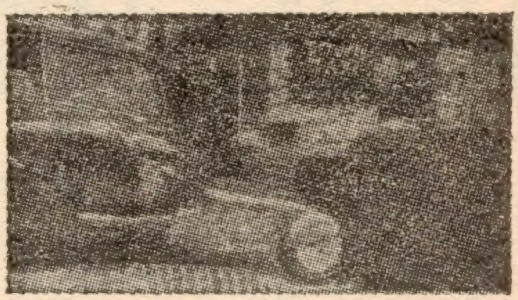

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Know Your West

A Department For Western Story Readers

By Harold Gluck

YOU SHOULD have stayed at home! But you wanted to see the great West, so you buckled on your old man's sixshooter, took down the hunting rifle, packed some grub, and went where you should not have gone. Which explains why at the given moment you are tied to a stake.

Chief Long Hair is giving orders to the braves. "More wood around his legs. Make heep big fire. No like cowboy from Times Square."

"Chief," you plead, "give me a break! I'm a real westerner; I can prove it. Go ask me some questions."

Can't say that Chief Long Hair hasn't got sporting blood in his system. He takes out a sheet of paper from his pouch and makes you a proposition.

"Got eight questions to ask. Answer four correctly, you go free; answer five correctly, you get big horse; answer six correctly, you get bag of gold; answer seven correctly, you get a squaw. Answer all correctly, you become chief."

You are game but also a bit curious. Something you must ask. "What happens if I only answer three, two, or one correctly?"

"Then you burn, White Fakir," responds the Indian. "Now get ready for questions. Here they come:

1. Crooked Hand was a:
   a. Pawnee Brave
   b. Sioux
   c. Apache
   d. Dakota.
2. The Conestoga was a:
   a. Wagon
   b. Indian sickness
   c. Food
   d. Material.
3. The Buffalo Trace is now:
   a. A harness
   b. An illness
   c. U. S. Highway 50 in Illinois
   d. Baby buffalo.
4. Range refers to:
   a. A Homestead
   b. Open Country
   c. A Ranch
   d. Cattle Car.
5. The Man who killed Billy The Kid was:
   a. Kit Carson
   b. Wild Bill Hickok.
   c. Pat Garrett
   d. Jeff Milton
6. The Leading Indian Chief at the Battle of the Little Big Horn River was:
   a. Sitting Bull
   b. Chief Gall of the Uncpapa Sioux
   c. Chief Long Hair

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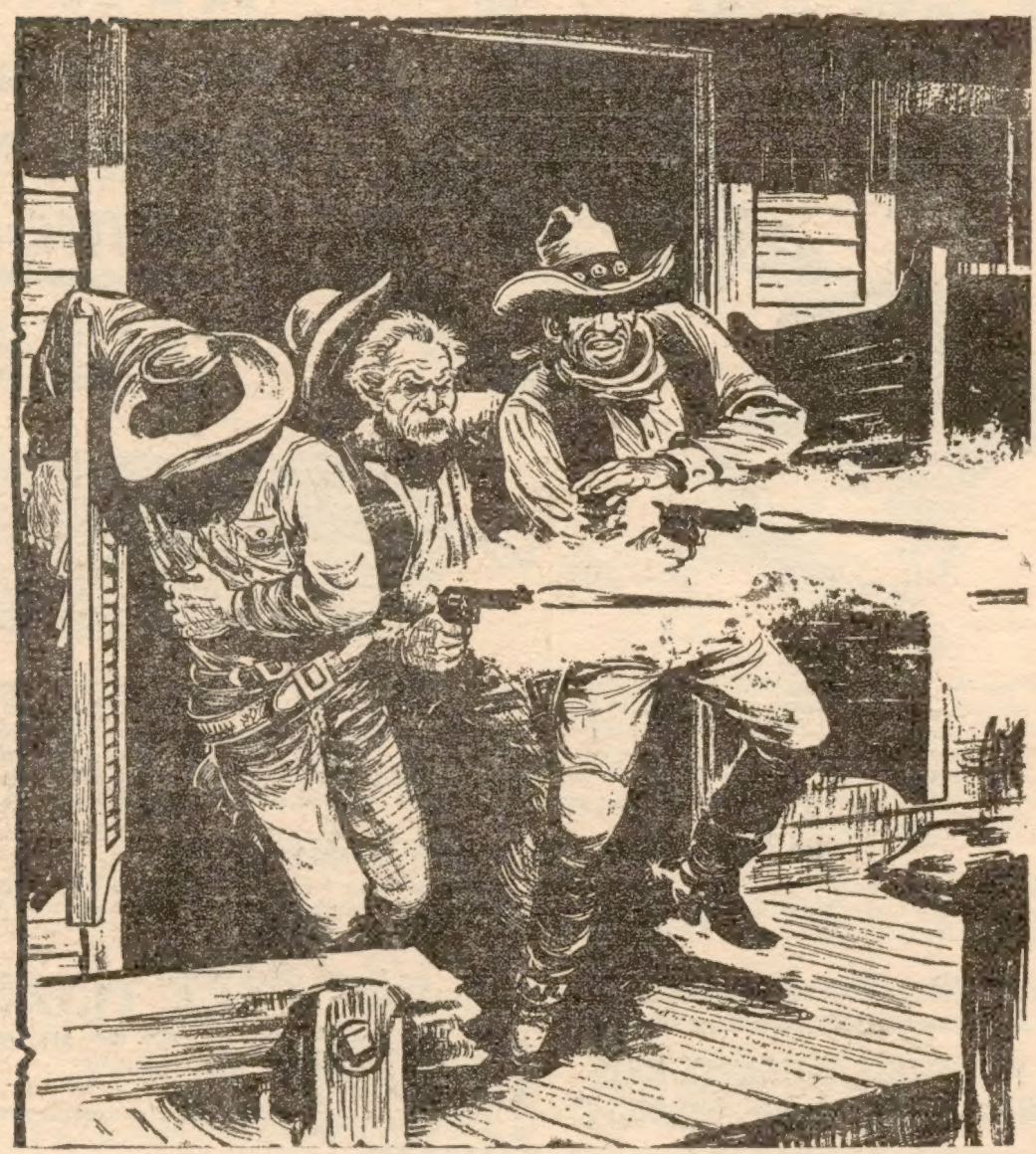
TRAILTOWN

by Lauran Paine



HE WALKED the scarred and scuffed plank sidewalk as if he owned it. There was a plain and disconcerting direct coldness to his pale eyes; the badly-healed bridge of his nose, over the generous, thin-lipped mouth, was his badge of a fighting man.

In Trailtown there were two kinds of men; cattlemen and Sam Anders. The cattlemen were big and little ranchers, cowboys, herders and break-

Sam Anders knew that Trailtown was just waiting for someone to come along who could down him; they feared and dreaded their constable, but no one respected him. Then Sam hung up his guns, married, and settled down. And the day came when Trailtown came to their ex-constable, begging him to strap his guns on again, hoping now that he wouldn't be downed . . .

ers. They were rollicking, tough, loud. occasionally sensitive and violent, and always thirsty and reckless. Sam Anders was the law; he was Trailtown's only example of his kind of a man. If the city council passed an ordinance,

★ **Novelet of Lawman's Destiny** ★

Sam Anders saw to it that it was obeyed. He was known, respected and disliked, all with unanimous and begrudged cordiality. Trailtown without its two types—the cowmen and Sam Anders—wouldn't have stayed on earth for five minutes.

At the end of a long, dry cattle-drive, with red eyes and parched throats, raw from the abrasive itch of the desolate miles through the Indian country, cowboys and cowmen stormed into Trailtown with an almost-insane exuberance. The tension was lifted from their souls, for a haunting uneasiness gripped a man's vitals when he saw the somber, immobile horsemen of the Red Man's plains watching like bronzed statues from the distant ridges.

Trailtown thrived and grew fat on the drovers and their riders, but it disapproved of their hilarity; that was where Sam Anders had come in. He was a known gun-fighter who, like all gunmen, used his gun for a living —the ethics of which were his own complex and rationalised ideals. No one questioned them, nor cared about them, either. All Trailtown asked, and got, was restrained wildness and a minimum of killings—and those confined to the element that carried guns and drank vast stores of green whiskey.

"Buff Harden's back." The pudgy, balding man with the thick, horn rimmed spectacles said as he sank onto a stool beside Sam at the *Boston House Cafe*. Sam finished drinking his coffee, set the cup down on its thick porcelain saucer and turned his head a little. He recognised Otto Gnau, Trailtown's leading merchant, and owner of the huge and highly profitable general store.

"That so? Well, reckon I'll have to look him up." Sam said it gently, thoughtfully and knew without looking, that Otto was smiling tightly to himself.

Otto, and a few other inherent cowards, never lost an opportunity to goad Sam into a gun-fight. They enjoyed the spectacle and no doubt hoped that a faster man with a gun would come along, someday. Not that they had any real animosity toward Sam; only it must have been a little monotonous to them to see Sam turn his back, holster his gun, and walk slowly away from every downed victim that came up against him.

"You tol' him to stay out'n Trailtown, didn't you?" Gnau asked.

"Sure, but that doesn't mean nothin'. I could tell you if you don't leave that damned lamp off at night that shines into the bank, I'd beat hell out of you. But you wouldn't turn the lamp out unless you was scared of the beatin', would you?"

Otto Gnau flushed darkly and ordered his sausage and bacon from Helen Sharp, the chestnut-haired young woman who owned and operated the cafe. "You mean," he said, evasively, "that you tellin' Buff not to come back to Trailtown won't mean nothin' to him? He thinks he's tougher than you are?"

"That's right. Buff's never been beaten yet and he's like a young pup. After they lick the first couple of mongrels, they think they're invincible. He'll come back to Trailtown for no other reason than just to try me. You'd like that, wouldn't you, Otto?" Anders' half-mocking tone inquired.

The merchant was regretting that he hadn't waited to come into the *Boston House Cafe* until Sam Anders had left. He didn't like Sam, and he knew that Sam held him the contempt. He shrugged. "It'd break the monotony."

Sam got up with a dry laugh, flipped a silver dollar on the counter and turned to Helen Sharp. "Helen, when you marry, dammit, don't marry a merchant. I've never seen one yet that wasn't fat, bald, and a coward." The words, in Trailtown, were killing insults.

They lay like a curse in the air and Helen threw a quick look at the red. lowered face of Otto, then swung her handsome features back to Sam An-

ders. There was cold scorn in her voice as she said, "The definition of a coward, Sam, is a lot in the way you look at it."

Sam's heavy eyebrows went up and he pocketed his change and thumbed his dusty, gracefully curved Stetson to the back of his head.

"That so? What's your definition?"

"A coward, to me, is any man who'll browbeat other men because he knows they aren't in his class with a gun." Her eyes were unblinking and wide. "Like you, Sam."

The words were low and husky, but when Sam opened his mouth to answer back, the girl turned on her heel and disappeared beyond the gaudy curtain that hung between the counter and the kitchen. Sam looked after her thoughtfully for a long moment, swung back and let his gaze drift over the the eating merchant, then he turned abruptly and stalked out of the cafe.

BUFF HARDEN was small, wiry, slash-mouthed and cold-eyed. He wasn't more then twenty-three or four years old, but already the hesitant, slouchy walk of a wary animal set him apart from other men. It was difficult to determine the number of his kills, but there had been enough honest witnesses to at least twelve of them to establish him as a gun-hawk. Sam Anders had ordered him to leave Trailtown and stay away, after he shot and killed a half-drunk Texas cowboy. Buff had left, but the rancor within him had brought him back to even the score and wipe out the only dubious mark of cowardice on his record. Trailtown quickly heard and saw Buff and knew what was in the wind.

Sam drifted up to the *Satin Slipper* saloon, strolled to the bar not ten feet from where Harden was taking on an especially early load of rotgut whiskey, and ignored the gunman entirely. There were only six or eight patrons at the early hour and they froze, afraid to try and make it to the door, yet afraid to look away, too.

"A nice cold beer, Joel," Sam said to the suddenly white-faced bartender, with his thin smile, "to sort of wash my breakfast down." The beer slid across the scarred, damp bar top. Sam scooped it up with his left hand and half-turned to Buff Harden. "S'prised to see you in Trailtown, Buff." The voice was unnaturally gentle and soft.

Harden came s l o w l y around. "Shouldn't be, Constable."

"Not even after I told you to stay out of town?" The words fell, petal-soft, in the still atmosphere.

Harden wagged his head slightly from side to side and his narrowed, chalky eyes were frozen on Sam, their irises huge in the wet, opaqueness of his eyeballs. "No," he said, barely above a whisper, "not even after you told me to leave Trailtown."

Sam didn't drink his beer. He knew the first move was his, but he wasn't fool enough to give Harden an opening that would block his vision, like tilting the beer glass. Sudden death was in the air, and somebody was going to ride it to eternity. Anders had no intention of offering Harden an excuse to kill him in cold blood, and that was what it would amount to the minute the beer-glass interfered with his vision.

He smiled, set the beer down on the bar top with a tiny, clinking sound, and continued his lounging, indifferent stare. "No sense in goin' over it all, Buff. You know why I ordered you to stay out of Trailtown as well as I do. You didn't stay away an' now you've come back to settle the score. You got

no other reason to be here." He let the words lie there for a moment, then the smile slid sideways off his face and the killer—eager, apprehensive and forceful, was there in its place.

"Draw!" The word crashed into the heavy air like a toll of doom. Several things happened at once. The ashen-faced watchers threw themselves flat on the floor. Joel, the bartender, hid behind his mahogany bulwark.

Buff Harden leaped wildly sideways to destroy Sam's aim, his white talons flashing in a wild blur toward the well cared for gun on his hip. A thunderous, rocking explosion blasted the quiet, hot air, then another jolting clap of gunfire, then two more in quick, almost simultaneous savagery, spanked into the dead atmosphere. Joel raised up cautiously; he watched, as did the other spectators who were getting unashamedly to their feet, as Sam Anders walked over to the gory wreckage that was twisting off the sawdusted floor and swinging his gun to bear.

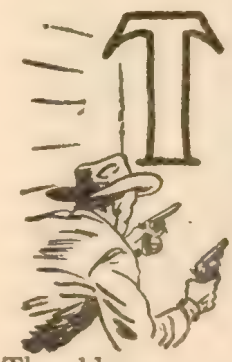
Sam leaned over suddenly, his gun arcing through the air in a savage, vicious swing, and the dull, bone crushing little sound as Sam's gun crunched into Harden's skull, made their stomachs contract. Buff Harden, blood from his shattered scalp running in a claret cascade down over his sightless eyes, sank back to the floor, twitched and lay still.

Sam straightened, his eyes dark pools of unleashed neolithic lust, and faced the watchers. "Anybody else?"

There wasn't a sound. Sam looked into each face, swung on his heel and stalked out of the saloon. The doors swung to behind his broad back and still the tragedy gripped the patrons. Finally Joel walked around the bar, went over to Harden, turned him gently and studied with morbid satisfaction, the two small, puffy holes in the man's chest where the shirt was torn in ragged, gaping holes and the swelling flesh showed through.

He raised up and looked at the others. "Bill, go get Doc Warner, will ya?"

2



RAILTOWN had another legend, and it dissected this legend with delight. Only, this time, there was a tinge of disapproval, too; Sam had deliberately broken Harden's skull when he was shot and downed. The older men, grizzled and forthright, and critical of too much mercy, opined that Sam had performed a dual purpose. First, he had ended the bad man's suffering; secondly, he had finished off his opponent without shooting him again—which he certainly would have had to do, since Harden was bringing his gun up. Still, the progressive tide of empire was surging over the raw, rough old West. There were many newcomers now—civilized people, used to law and order. And mutterings against Constable Anders grew as they traveled from mouth to mouth until they got back to Sam, via the bartender of the *Satin Slipper*, Joel Crawford.

"That Buff Harden affair caused a little talk, didn't it?" Crawford remarked.

Sam nursed his beer-glass and felt the coolness soften the sweaty palms of his hands. "Yeah. What was I s'posed to do—let the louse shoot me?"

Joel wiped the glass in his hand for a long time before he answered. Apparently he was turning his answer over in his mind. "No, I reckon not; but folks're sayin' you didn't have to stove in his gourd, either."

Sam drank his beer and a flush crept into his cheeks. He set the empty glass back on the bar, looked at Joel with a bitter, antagonistic glance, and shrugged. "Listen, Joel, if I'd of shot him, I'd of been a murderer; when I rapped him on the head, I became one anyway. I'm sorry I didn't do the job with the first two shots;

then I'd of been a hero. Havin' to finish him off when he was down and wounded makes me a killer. Well, to hell with local gossip; I do my job the only way I see to do it, an' if anyone else wants it, they can have it." He turned and walked quickly out of the saloon.

Helen Sharp was alone behind the counter, when Sam Anders walked in. She looked slowly at him and her thoughtful expression didn't change. If anything, it became a little more pensive.

"Hot beef and coffee."

Helen got up as Sam thumbed his hat to the back of his head and sank wearily onto a stool across the counter from her. She looked at his strong, capable features. There was a brooding loneliness about Anders that she had often felt. "Anything else, Constable?"

Helen had often used that designation to Sam, but today it cut like a knife. He thought he could sense some hostility or revulsion in it. He looked up quickly and his troubled glance crossed with the calm, gentle stare of the girl. "No. Nothin' else; matter of fact I'm not really very hungry anyway."

"I wouldn't be either."

"What do you mean? Oh, the Harden affair." He nodded his head slowly. "Of course *you* wouldn't; you'd have stood there like a little angel an' let that dyin' renegade plug you. Oh, hell," he got up off the stool and yanked his hat low over his eyes, "Trailtown's an old lady's home."

He turned to go when the girl's voice, crystal clear and even, came to him. "That wasn't what I meant at all."

HE HALF turned, a puzzled little furrow between his thick eyebrows. "No? What did you mean then?"

"Sam, you must have a guilty conscience to talk like—"

"Guilty conscience? Me? Not by a darned sight. That little weasel come back here for just one purpose; to see if he could kill me. Well, he couldn't, an' wherever he is now, he knows the answer. If I felt guilty every time I enforced the law—"

"That's just it, Sam; why do you feel that you have to enforce the law?"

"Why?" Sam was exasperated and surprised, too. "Because that's my job, Helen; I get paid to keep the peace an' that's what I aim to do."

She shrugged. "Evidently your aim is good, too." She started slowly for the kitchen and hesitated, her head over one shoulder. "Don't you ever want to do something else? Don't you want a home, Sam? Are you always going to be killing people?"

Sam Anders was taken off guard. He had his dream, like every other man. It was a little ranch and a few cows back in the juniper hills where there was a good trout stream not far from the house and plenty of game. There was a woman in the dream, too. Slowly Sam went back and sat down again on the stool and pushed his hat back.

Helen was still looking at him, and he studied her face for a full ten seconds before he answered. "I never wanted to kill men, Helen; I don't want to kill them now. As soon as I can afford to, I'm going to buy a little ranch I know of back in the hills. There's a good old log house on it and pretty fair old barn, too."

His eyes slid off her face and a blankness came over them. He was walking over the little ranch in his memory. "An' you ought'ta see the feed. There's even a trout stream not far from the house an' there's a good meadow, all in weeds now, but—"

Sam chopped it off short and looked up, slightly embarrassed. Helen was looking at him intently, her full mouth slightly parted, and in his confusion, it arose out of his head somewhere and hit him full force. Helen Sharp was beautiful. She was big and sturdy and shapely and strong. There was the indomitable blood of her people in her

veins. Sam gulped and turned scarlet all over. "Do you have a dream?"

She flushed, but her eyes were steady. "Yes," she smiled wistfully, "but I'm afraid it'll never come true."

"Tell me about it."

"No." She turned in confusion and walked into the kitchen, her voice coming back from beyond the gently undulating curtain. "I'll have your dinner in a jiffy."

SATURDAY in Trailtown was an event. Ranch-women exchanged gossip wherever they met, and men joked and talked in little knots while the women shopped in Otto Gnau's huge emporium. There were rigs of all kinds stirring up the dust and horsemen jogged past where Sam Anders, Constable of Trailtown, hard-eyed and watching, slouched against a tiny sewing shop. Sam felt uneasy, although he couldn't say why. The day was hot and little dust-devils played riotously in the parched roadway. Some small, grimy little urchins with cotton sash cords were tryin' to rope several scrawny old hens who had been picking in the dust at the edge of the *Satin Slipper* hitchrail. Three strangers rode through the confusion; lean, hawk-faced men, burned brown and whipped red by the inclement elements.

Sam watched them swing down and tie up before the *Satin Slipper*. One of the men looked vaguely familiar. He wore two guns, tied down, and his mouth was a bloodless line in a harsh face. The other two were younger, wide-eyed men. There was a stamp on all three, however, that Sam recognised; they were dangerous, bad men to cross, drunk or sober. He shrugged indifferently. He'd seen hundreds stamped out of the same mold. So long as they obeyed the laws, they were welcome to spend their money in Trailtown.

Sam was just sitting down at Helen's counter for his noon meal when Otto Gnau marched solemnly up to him. The constable looked up critically. He didn't care for Otto, but even so, the

merchant was on the board of town councilers. And he thought he read a masked eagerness in Otto's face and bearing. He raised his eyebrows without saying a word. Otto smiled quickly at Helen and sat down next to Sam.

"Sort o' early for you to be eatin', isn't it, Otto? Hell, I never saw you leave the store while there was so many cash customers in it, before," Sam said.

If Otto understood the jibe, he let it pass. He licked his lips with a furtive, pleased little mannerism. "Sam, you got trouble."

" 'That so? I usually have."

"There's three Hardens down at the *Satin Slipper* askin' for you," Otto said.

Sam drummed slowly on the counter and regarded Otto with an unpleasant expression. He started to say something, changed his mind and grunted thoughtfully. "How'd ya know?"

"Joel come in an' asked me to hunt you up an' tell you to ride out of town for awhile."

"Well now, that was damned decent of Joel." The constable looked quizzically at Otto. "An' I suppose you advise the same thing?"

Otto squirmed a little and shrugged. "It's up to you."

Sam laughed drily. "Sure it is, Otto. Anything is up to me in Trailtown that takes guts, isn't it?"

OTTO HAD heard Sam's voice get gentle, caressing before, and he knew that that was the best time not to aggravate him. "I reckon."

Otto had long-since lost his eagerness to prod Sam into fighting the three Hardens. Now all he wanted to do was get back to his store and watch —out the big window that had cost him so much and was his pride and joy—in the hope that he might see Sam go up against three killers at once. His pink tongue flicked over his lips in anticipation and he thought that Sam Anders had reached the end of his rope now, and was going to get blasted into eternity. He even nodded a little as he visualised it. Sam would go out in a blazing, thunderous, sulphurous kaleidoscope of blood and death, which Otto thought was a fitting finale to his swashbuckling career. He got up slowly and turned away. "S'long, Sam."

Sam smiled tightly at Otto's finality. It sounded as though Otto had already figured they'd never see each other again. It irritated Sam a little, and he didn't answer. Instead, he swung around and faced the fullness of Helen's stare. "Hell, don't you look like I'm gone already, too."

"Sam."

"Yes?" There was a shy sort of eagerness in his voice. Helen noticed it.

"Oh, nothing; I'll go get your food." She turned away and started for the kitchen. Sam leaned far over the counter and grabbed her arm. She stopped, startled, and turned back. Sam was dumbfounded. There was a misty dew in Helen's large eyes and her mouth was pale with the effort to keep it steady.

"Sit down a minute, Helen." She sat. "Remember the day we were talkin' about dreams?" Sam's face was eager and intent. Helen nodded. "Well, I never told you all of mine."

"It doesn't matter."

Sam stopped, straightened a little on his stool and regarded her somberly, a little melancholy in his eyes. "Sure it does; don't you want to hear it?"

Helen's fight to control the quivering mouth was a losing battle. She stood up suddenly and her breasts were rising and falling in a ragged, uneven way that wasn't natural. Her voice was almost a shriek and her tone cut like a knife. Sam was startled and nonplussed. He watched the tempest of her inner emotion with awe. "No. I don't want to hear it, Constable Anders. What good are dreams if you'll never live to realise them? You have no right to dream, anyway. You're a fighting man. A killer. A gunman. You're not a civilized man. What kind of a husband would you make, always hunting trouble, shooting people, hitting someone over the head with a gun-barrel? What kind of a father would you make? Your first present to a son would be a gun!"

SAM WAS still sitting stiffly on the stool when Helen choked and ran into the kitchen. The old Seth Thomas clock on the back wall, with its fine sprinkling of fly specks on the outer glass, droned on evenly, unruffled, through the bewilderment and tension that settled over Sam Anders with a sudden, cold awakening. Sam had a rare and vivid flash of insight. All of Trailtown thought the same thing of him. Otto, for instance. Otto's only interest, besides his thriving business and the huge glass window he was so proud of, was a longing to see Sam Anders beaten and humbled.

He wasn't respected, so much as he was feared and dreaded. Little beads of cold sweat popped out on Sam's broad forehead. He got up slowly, unconsciously pulled his dusty old brown Stetson square on his head and turned toward the door.

"Sam?" The voice was muffled by the gaudy curtain that cut off the kitchen from the counter.

"Yes?"

"Will you ride out of town for a few days?"

"Helen, you know—"

"No!" The voice was bitter and harsh. "No. Of course you won't. You'll go hunt them, won't you? You'll have to prove to yourself that you're not only faster than the worst of them, but you'll have to prove that you're faster than all three of the others, put together."

"Helen, I'm not trying to prove anything." He was frowning as though he didn't quite believe himself. "Helen, before I go, there's something I want to tell you."

"I don't want to hear it."

"Well, dammit, you're goin' to hear it anyway. In my dream I have a wife. She an' I ride that ranch together watchin' our calves grow. You know who she is?" There was no answer from behind the curtain but Sam went on anyway. "It's you. Helen, will you marry me?"

"No. I wouldn't marry any gunfighter."

"Doggone it, I'm not a gun-fighter. Look, I'll quit this constable job. I've got almost enough money, anyway. Will you marry me then?"

The curtain waved a little and Helen stood framed in its riot of color. "Sam Anders, if you'll ride out of town for a few days, until the Hardens are gone, and quit the constable's job, I'll marry you."

Sam screwed up his face into a wry expression. "Fer gosh sakes, Helen. I can't run from those would-be hard cases; you can see that—"

"I can't see any such thing. If you were thinking of us, together, you'd be willing to do it, for my sake."

Sam snorted disgustedly. "You're kiddin' yourself, Helen. You're not the breed that'd marry a coward." He took several steps forward and was close to her, across the counter, before he spoke again. "Helen, I love you. I'm goin' now, but I'll be back. If you don't understand now, you will someday." She didn't say anything as he turned and walked stiffly out of the cafe.

3

ANY PLACE where inbred curiousity is mistakenly thought to be intelligence, gossip flies. Trailtown was no exception. All over town the news was spreading like wildfire. Buff Harden's father and two brothers were in town to avenge Buff's death. They were drinking at the *Satin Slipper,* waiting for Sam Anders.

A lot of the Saturday ranch traffic —men who normally made their purchases, visited a little, then headed back to the wide rangeland—were still in town. No one wanted to miss what they were confident was shaping up to be the fight of the century. Sam Anders against three Hardens.

Trade was at a standstill. Here and there little knots of low talking, wary men were gathered near a convenient opening, like the gateless maw of the livery barn or the sooty doorway to the blacksmith shop. There were few women and no children in sight the full, dusty, sun-bleached length of Trailtown's main street. The sun was well off to the west; it was afternoon, and a buzzing sort of expectant clamor settled unnaturally over town. It had to come soon now, or not at all, and the Hardens were loudly and profanely making their boast, while Sam Anders hadn't shown up yet. Everyone knew, by now, that the Hardens meant business. If anyone sloped out, it wouldn't be the challengers.

There was anticipation and apprehension about Sam, but none of the local people ever thought for a minute that he'd slip away. Even so, everyone was jittery and restless as the afternoon wore on and he didn't show up. The Hardens, who didn't know their man at all—except by reputation—were drinking more and snarling louder

taunts, certain, as the minutes ticked by, that they had frightened the constable out of town.

The sun was coasting over the limitless prairie in a sea of sepulchre coloring, mauve, ochre and grey, when the impatient rumblings along the main street of Trailtown dropped to a guarded, hushed whisper. Constable Sam Anders was coming. Frowns slid off bronzed faces and slitted eyes widened in expectation. The last of the timid folk prudently faded away as Sam walked slowly, purposefully, down the middle of the dusty roadway, arms hanging loose, eyes beady and bright with the gun-fighter's fever reflecting from their depths.

For a long moment only the strident voices, thick and hoarse with a long afternoon's drinking behind them, came nasally from the *Satin Slipper*, then even those voices died away. The news had come to the Hardens that their man was walking down the middle of the road. The wait was over; but it had been a long one and each of the Hardens looked at the others. There was nervous sweat on their faces now, and their features were slack and grey.

"Let's go."

Joel, the bartender, watched the stiff figures as they walked side by side toward the batwing doors. His baleful glance was cold and unblinking. Slowly he reached under the bar with a pale, white hand and came up with a sawed-off shotgun. Methodically he walked from behind the bar and followed the Hardens; three to one was intolerable odds to Joel and he had long ago made up his mind to see that Sam Anders got a fair shake. So long as the constable could stay on his feet, Joel had no intention of butting in—but he neither approved nor intended to witness, any coup de grace such as Sam had given Buff Harden. Joel figured that when the constable had polished off Buff, he had only killed a renegade.

Sam's course was direct and blunt, like his nature. He knew better than to use the plank sidewalk, where a sniper could down him before he saw the gun or heard the shot. He knew, too, that his chances were a lot less than even; but this, he told himself, was his last fight in the name of law and order—it was only fitting that he should finish up his job with a blaze of spectacular violence. Bitterly he knew that this was what Trailtown wanted, and he was there to see that his neighbors weren't disappointed.

A ROOSTER crowed somewhere and an impatient horse whinnied in the late afternoon; aside from these manifestations, Trailtown was as silent—as hushed and tensed as a graveyard. Eyes watched, but lips didn't move. Dust gyrated lazily up over Sam's boot-toes and his spur rowels made a tiny tinkling sound as he moved forward, watching the batwing doors of the *Satin Slipper*. For just a second the doors quivered; then they flew violently open and three men, crouched and close together, emerged. Sam's hand dipped and rose like a wind-blown flame and the big gun in his fist began a methodical, belly high coughing crescendo. The shots seemed to be leisurely spaced and the acrid smell of sulphurous smoke spread in the still air.

The Hardens were gunmen of the first water. The older man was coldly efficient, if the two younger ones weren't quite as much so. One of them went over backwards, tried to grab the batwing door as he fell, missed, crashed heavily to the scarred planking behind him and twitched violently. Sam felt a vicious jerk in his left leg. He staggered and one shot went wild; his leg collapsed under him and he went down to one knee, still firing. His dusty old Stetson went sailing through the air like a great, awkward bird. Another Harden went down, the top of his head and his dirty hat a shattered combination of gore. Only the father was left standing; he went down to one knee, placed his six gun carefully over his left arm, bent at

the elbow, took deliberate aim, and was knocked sideways as he pulled the trigger. Sam Anders' bullet went squarely through his heart.

Sam felt the scorching burn of the dead man's last shot as it seared its fiery passage along his right side, over the ribs. He gritted his teeth, forced himself erect, gingerly balancing on his good leg and looked dubiously at his .45. There was one shot left. He raised the gun methodically, sighted it gravely, and pulled the trigger; Otto Gnau's big plate-glass window, where the merchant had been watching the gun fight, dissolved into a million fragments under the impact of the slug. Sam holstered his empty gun, looked arrogantly around himself at the blank buildings and vacant sidewalk where he knew a hundred beady eyes were watching him, turned painfully and forced himself to walk as far as the *Boston House Cafe*, where he sank dazedly onto a stool, in thin lipped silence, under the horrified and incredulous eyes of Helen Sharp.

TRAILTOWN was so busy discussing the incredible gunfight between Sam Anders and the Hardens, that it hardly had time to notice that it had a new town constable. By the time the fight had become a legend, Sam and Helen Anders were riding over their newly-acquired ranch, looking anxiously for new calves where the wily old cows would hide them in the brush, or under a tall, fragrant juniper tree. Life had taken on a benign and roseate meaning to them both. Helen learned there was two sides to every man. Sam learned that for half of his life he hadn't known the full meaning of life, to start with.

It lasted for a year and a half, then one evening Otto Gnau, delegated by the town fathers of Trailtown, rode out to visit. They sat in front of the fireplace after a big dinner and Otto told the reason of his call.

"I didn't come about the window." Sam smothered a smile and Helen tossed him a reproving little frown. "Trailtown's got trouble."

"Oh? Then it isn't me, this time?"

Otto recognised the thin, bantering edge in Sam's voice and squirmed a little, as of old, his somber eyes on the flickering, fragrant pine knots in the fireplace. "No. It ain't your trouble, this time, Sam; it's Trailtown's trouble. The boys asked me if I'd drop out an' see you about it." Otto felt Helen's head come up and her deep, large eyes, measure him slowly with female intuition. He didn't look at her; he knew, from local gossip, that she had agreed to marry Sam providing he hung up his gun.

Otto's preoccupation with the fire was sober and unblinking. "It's like this, Sam. Things been pretty peaceable for a year or so now. Hasn't been any real trouble 'ceptin' drunk cowboys off the trail, for a long time, but now there's somethin' new."

"What?"

"Well, about a month ago Calvin Carthy ordered one of them new homesteaders off'n his homestead; Cal claimed that his folks'd been grazin' that land for fifty years an' no law could take it away from 'em."

"Well, can the law give it to somebody else?"

Otto's head bobbed seriously. "I reckon. We had a town council meetin' an' the State's Attorney came over and gave us the lowdown. Homesteaders got more right to free, gov'ment land than any cowman who hasn't never fenced it or improved it; it's a new federal law."

Sam looked furtively at Helen; he knew what was coming and wanted to see her reaction. Helen was sitting back in her chair, her face impassive and her eyes regarding Otto Gnau with a baleful, accusing, unblinking stare. Sam let his eyes slide toward the fireplace.

He made a quick decision, remembering his promises to Helen, and shrugged slightly, indifferently. "Otto, I'm sure proud of the honor the town councilmen have done me, but I'm out

of the law-business. Don't you have a constable that'll put Carthy in his place?"

Otto grunted in disgust and shook his head. "He quit this mornin'."

There was a long silence when the crackling of the fire filled the room, then Otto spoke again. "Sometime last night Cal an' his two toughest riders showed up at one of the homesteaders, beat hell out'n him an' shot his only team of work horses."

Anger began to come up in the gorge of Sam Anders. He knew Cal Carthy —the son of a pioneer cowman, a rich bully and a loud-mouthed, overbearing braggart who used his money and other men's guns to get what he wanted.

Otto sighed audibly. "This here homesteader's an old feller with a wisp of a wife an' a couple of scrawny kids. They haven't got anythin' an' probably never will have; but dammit, it looks to me like they ought to have a chance out here. Don't it to you?"

Sam started to nod, caught himself and shrugged instead. "Like I said, Otto; I'm not in the law-business any more. Sorry."

OTTO GNAU left. Sam watched him ride off in the gloom, shoulders bent and short legs flopping against his gentle old mare's fat sides. Otto had told Sam something else, when they were alone outside; something that surprised Sam. "If you'll take over an' calm Carthy down, Sam, I'll ride beside you." Coming from Otto, whom Sam knew to be a typical merchant, afraid of violence and with a great distaste for trouble, Sam knew that the plight of the homesteader had touched the merchant close to the quick.

The following morning Sam and Helen ate in silence. Sam put on his hat and hesitated at the door. "Reckon I'll ride up to Cedar Gulch an' see if that springin' heifer has calved yet. Y'know, the one we were lookin' for yesterday."

Helen nodded, avoiding Sam's eyes, and he went out, spurs tinkling merrily as he headed for the corral and the tack room.

Helen Anders washed the dishes haphazardly. She knew that Sam had been angered at the treatment the homesteader had gotten from Cal Carthy. She knew, too, that Trailtown was looking for Sam Anders, alone, to straighten things out. Her lips were flat against her teeth. She felt a surge of anger shoot through her head. Sam was her husband; she didn't want to be a widow, and she didn't want Sam to risk his life. Let Trailtown look out for itself. There were plenty of other men for the job. Sam couldn't always be dragged into every brawl just because the others thought he was invincible.

The morning dragged. There was a stillness in the air, like maybe a rain was in the offing. She cleaned the cabin, set things to rights, brushed against Sam's dusty, holstered sixgun with its half filled cartridge belt, where it hung from a peg on the bedroom wall. She glared at it as though it were a personal enemy, her mind busy and bitter as she worked. Finally she sat down with her sewing basket and let the thoughts run riot as her

fingers manipulated a pair of bone knitting needles.

It was almost noon when Helen put aside the sewing, went into the bedroom and busied herself for a few moments, then went quickly through the house, out the door and down to the corral where she caught and saddled her horse, swung aboard and loped off toward a shady little fern inhabited glen by the creek she loved so well.

Sam found the heifer back in the chaparral. She had a newborn, dark red bull calf. He watched the cow nudge and lick and low to the youngster and felt that peculiar pride and satisfaction every cowman feels when he sees a newborn, wobbly, long legged little calf. There was a sense of peace in Sam that only an occasional shaft of uneasiness, marred. He rode slowly back toward the house. Helen would be there, with a good lunch on the checkered tablecloth. He tried to smile, but it wouldn't come up, instead he saw an old man, bloody and beaten, whipped by the cruel son of a rich cowman who'd never worked a day in his life. He swore a little to himself, swung down, unsaddled and went into the house.

Sam was dumbfounded; the kitchen table was bare. He walked slowly through the house. Helen wasn't there. He went into the bedroom and stopped short in the doorway, a dawning look of understanding spreading over his tanned, lean face. A chair had been placed next to the bed, over the back of it was a clean, faded blue shirt. His old constable's badge was pinned squarely over the right pocket, as he'd always worn it. Lying across the seat of the chair was his freshly dusted .45, lying ominously in its shiny old scabbard and leaning casually against the side of the chair was his Winchester.

SAM METHODICALLY put on the shirt, buckled on the sixgun, checked it for loads, and levered the Winchester. He started slowly for the horse corral. He thought back to that day, over a year ago, when he'd tried to explain to Helen that a man can't run or hide. He'd told her that, someday, she'd understand; she understood, now, but he knew she wanted to be alone.

The ride to Trailtown didn't take long. He was riding past Otto's store, saw the dumpy merchant look up, startled, where he was waiting on a woman customer with a bolt of gingham cloth in his pudgy hands.

Otto suddenly thrust the bolt into the woman's arms. "Here, keep it. It's a present from the store." He grabbed up a sparkling new Colt .45 from a showcase, jammed shells into it with desperate hurry, spilling half a box on the floor.

The woman customer looked at him with a sagging mouth; she was certain that Otto had suddenly gone daft. She was certain of it as he tore off his apron, flung it on the floor and ran wildly out of the store, stuffing the .45 into his extended waistband as he ran. "Sam. Sam. Wait up."

Sam swung down and tied up before the *Satin Slipper*. Wide eyes and open mouths greeted his appearance, with his old badge on, armed for war. He smiled at Otto's red face as the merchant rushed up. "Where's the fire, Otto?"

"Sam, look, wait a minute an' Ill get my mare. Don't go 'till I get back." Without waiting for an answer, Otto loped awkwardly for the livery barn. Sam watched him go with a wide grin. Otto running was something to see.

Joel looked up quickly when Sam strode up to the bar and ordered a beer. "The homesteader?" he said, quietly.

Sam looked at him speculatively for a long moment before he answered. "Word sure gets around, don't it, Joel?"

The bartender shrugged elaborately. "I'm on the town council, Sam."

"Oh. I forgot."

Joel mechanically untied his apron, tossed it under the bar and nodded

to another bartender. "'Be back, directly." He came around the end of the bar with a Winchester in his hands. He reddened a little under Sam's stare. "Never could hit the broad side of a barn with them hand-guns." He paused self consciously, his pale blue eyes frank and wide. "You ready to go?"

Sam pondered a moment. He didn't want them along. He had no confidence in either one of them in a fight, still, they wanted to be in on it. He shrugged and finished his beer. "I reckon."

4

TRAILTOWN was a beehive of busy tongues and avid stares as Sam rode out of town with Joel and Otto Gnau, each armed to the teeth. Sam pretended not to notice Otto's proud, straight back and Joel's embarrassed, blushing face. He almost smiled but he didn't; after all, Otto's face was so morbidly serious and frowning that Sam's smile would let Otto know how ludicrous he looked with the new gun, the sleepy old fat mare, and the jelly-like paunch bumping against the saddle horn as he rode.

The homesteader had built a soddy right smack dab in the middle of the old Carthy hay land. Sam thought, wryly, that he couldn't have picked a likelier spot if he wanted to stir up a hornet's nest. The three of them swung down and tied their horses to the side of a bleached, worn old wagon as a tall, gaunt old man came out of the sod house, a rusty old Sharp's musket in his shaking hands. Sam glimpsed two frightened, skinny kids hiding behind the swollen eyed, ashen faced little wisp of a grey headed woman in the doorway. He studied the man professionally and felt a little uneasiness at the way the big bored old gun was weaving around in the gnarled, work stiffened old hands.

"Mister, I'd sure appreciate it you'd set that thing down before it goes off accidental like and kills somebody."

The rawboned old man lowered his head like a rutting buck and a stubborn, baleful look spread over his badly cut up face where the Carthy men had worked him over. "Got no call to, stranger. What ya want?"

"We want to know how much them horses that got shot were worth?"

The rifle barrel sagged a little. "They was old, stranger, but they was a good work-team. I raised 'em from colts, back in Indiana. We brung 'em across—"

"Yeah. I figured all that; what was they worth?"

"Maybe thirty dollars apiece, maybe more; I got no idea. All I know is that I can't farm out here 'thout 'em, an' I got no money to buy more." The bitter face looked up a little. "You come from Carthy?"

"No, not by a damned sight; we come to straighten this trouble out. You got a paper provin' you're in legal possession of this here land?"

The old head nodded vigorously. "Sure. Come into the house an' I'll show it ya."

Sam had taken about five steps toward the house and the old man had propped the rifle against a stump, when Otto Gnau grunted loudly, looking off over the flat, rich land where a new barbed wire fence was in process of being put up. Sam stopped suddenly and turned back. Otto was pointing. "Here it comes. Trouble."

Sam followed Otto's pudgy arm and saw the three riders loping easily over the prairie toward the soddy. He recognised Cal Carthy in the lead and turned back to the homesteader. "Your neighbors are comin' back."

The old man lunged for the old Sharp's rifle with a curse, the caked blood on his ragged shirt darker than the angry flood of blood that came over his face. "They'll never get close enough to lay a hand on me again."

Sam reached over with a firm hand and forced the old gun down. "You leave this to us. We come out here to settle this business an' it looks like we're goin' to get our chance." He jerked his head toward the sod house. "Go on in the house an' stay there. Don't come out until it's all over. An' keep your woman and the kids away from the doorway an' the winders."

THE HOMESTEADER turned reluctantly and plodded into the house, sweeping his family before him. Anger still burned in his sunken eyes as he tossed a last look at the nearing riders and slammed the hand made door. Sam barked at Otto and Joel. "You two go aroun' the soddy an' stay out of sight. Use your rifles if shootin' starts but don't make a move 'till I do. If we can warn Carthy off, it's better'n havin' a fight." Joel and Otto walked around the edge of the crude house, levered shells into their rifles, cocked them and waited.

Cal Carthy had deep set brown eyes, a small, snub, short sort of nose and a pendulous, very heavy jaw that made him almost lisp when he talked. He was very satisfied with himself and imagined himself a very dangerous man. He reined up in front of Sam Anders, who was standing wide legged and relaxed, the two hired gunmen behind him and a little to one side, frozen faced and wary. "Didn't know you was back in the law-business, Sam."

" 'Wasn't, Cal, 'till you ganged up on this clodhopper last night."

"I got my rights, Sam."

Anders shook his head slightly. "Sure you have, Cal; but they don't include goin' aroun' beatin' up folks because they're complyin' with the law."

Carthy snorted and his deep set, small brown eyes were unpleasant. "No squatter's goin'—"

"You're wrong, Cal; this here man's within his legal rights. You owe him a team of horses, too."

Cal Carthy looked at Sam Anders for a long while without saying a word. He knew Sam was lethal with a gun, but he was in no position to back down. If he had been alone, he might have joked his way out of it. There were too many witnesses now, and besides, he'd made his brag and had to live up to it. He let the air come out of his lungs in a tense sigh, jabbed his gun.

All hell broke loose. Sam's first shot missed Carthy altogether and miraculously struck one of the hired gunmen squarely between the eyes. The man's horse gave a violent lunge and dropped him like a sodden sack on the churned-up earth.

Carthy's horse carried him around the edge of the soddy, where he was suddenly confronted with two venomous Winchesters v o m i t i n g leaden death into him at short range. Carthy's look of surprise at seeing Joel and Otto froze on him as the slugs knocked him savagely out of the saddle. He was dead before he hit the ground. Sam felt warm blood running down inside his shirt-collar as he and the remaining gunman traded a furious fusillade of shots. The gunman's aim was spoiled twice by his terrified horse and he never finished cocking his .45 for the third shot; Sam's bullet cut him down and the next slug tore a hole in his chest as large as a spur rowel. He went off the snorting, stampeding horse backwards, and bounced limply when he struck.

Joel and Otto examined Sam's ear. The entire lobe was shot away. They clucked with concern and tried to staunch the flow of blood with their none too clean handkerchiefs.

The old homesteader came lumbering out of his soddy, a white, exuberant smile on his face. "Lord, I'd of never believed it, but I seen it with my own eyes."

He rambled on, words tumbling over one another in his excitement. Sam smiled ruefully and wondered what Helen was going to say over the

lobeless ear as he sent Otto for the horses. The homesteader was having a rough time of trying to appear manly and dignified as his wife cried loudly and the children stared, shaken and wide eyed, at the sprawling forms of the dead men.

"Constable, if ever I can—"

"Forget it, amigo. Look, I got a good work team over at my place that I was figurin' on turnin' loose. I don't need 'em an' don't want to feed 'em. If you'll come over in a day or two—"

"Sir, I don't know what to say. I'll be over. I'll—"

SAM, REDFACED and uncomfortable, nudged his horse and loped away with a wave of his hand. Joel and Otto only a few feet behind. When they were out of sight of the soddy and the still waving homesteaders, Sam turned accusingly to Otto. "Otto, you got'ta come back to the ranch with me. You got to explain to Helen about this ear."

Otto, wreathed in a sweaty smile, a man who had found himself and his courage behind a nester's mean sod house, nodded quickly. "Sure Sam; she'll understand. I'll tell her how we—"

Joel interrupted. "Sam, I'd better ride into town an' send out a wagon for the bodies, don't you reckon?"

Sam nodded solemnly. "Yeah; can't leave 'em out there. The way old clod-hopper feels right now, he might scalp 'em." Joel swung off across the prairie toward Trailtown, eager to bear the first news of the fight he had played an important part in.

Otto's confidence drained out of him as he saw Helen, straight backed and rigid, watching them loping into the yard. He had felt only personal elation as they were riding towards Sam's place, but suddenly a sense of quick guilt stole over him. He knew, all of a sudden, that Helen Anders had been suffering a tremendous uncertainty whether her husband would ever come back to her at all. They unsaddled at the corral and Sam walked up to Helen, without a word, and she came into his arms. Otto fidgeted nervously and looked at the sticky red stains on Sam's shirt. Helen saw them too. She looked at the mangled ear and a tremendous relief surged through her, followed by a sense of weakness. She turned on Otto, eyes flashing fire.

"Otto Gnau, if you ever set foot on this ranch again, with anything on your mind except visiting, I'll—I'll —I'll do something awful. You and Trailtown both have got to get over leaning on Sam for everything."

She took two rapid steps forward, her fists clenched. "Don't you ever think of the wives who wait, and the children, and the feelings of others? Otto I ought to—"

Otto was re-saddling his lazy big mare with a frenzied rush of flying fingers. He leaped onto her back in a kind of violent sprawl, waved jerkily at Sam, threw a final, startled glance at Helen, and dashed out of the yard.

★

Know Your West (*continued from page 6*)

d. Squat Knees.

7. The road brand originated in:
   a. Kansas.
   b. Colorado
   c. Wyoming
   d. Texas.

8. Tenderfoots was a name originally applied to:
   a. The remuda
   b. Imported cattle
   c. Sheep
   d. Indian children.

(Answers at the bottom of page 96)

DANCE
BIJOU

They had been friends, almost brothers, so very long ago. Now, Stan wanted to cut clear of his past. But inwardly, he knew that Al would find him some day, and when their trails crossed they'd be on opposite sides of the law . . .

PISTOL PARDNERS

Novelet of Owlhoot Redemption

by Jim Brewer

FIVE YEARS in prison gives a man plenty of time to think.

Stan Sanders had gone into the penitentiary with the idea of getting a good rest while he was there. And for the first six months or so it hadn't been bad. He had worked on the rockpile, eaten, and slept and taken it easy. But one night he wakened from a particularly moving dream. He had dreamed that he was riding his favorite horse along a river, and he could almost smell the horse and see the pattern the moonlight made on the water.

Stan lay for a long time that night staring into the darkness, and he wanted more than anything else to saddle that horse and ride the mustang along that river again. But nine layers of steel and concrete kept him from that objective, and from that moment on it was hell. Seconds became minutes, minutes hours, and an hour an eternity itself.

That five years became an endless period. Stan, like the other prisoners, lived only for the moment of his release. But, unlike most of the others he took the lesson he was learning to heart. Society had judged him and placed him in the penitentiary because he had broken its laws. He hated the drab prison and its routine and life. He determined never to come back again, and in order to do that he had to live within society's laws. Therefore, he made up his mind: he *was* going to live within the law!

Toward the end of his term Al Aldrich came to visit him. Al and Stan were orphans and had grown up together in the little town of Two Step. Undisciplined as they were, they had drifted into petty lawlessness. From cattle rustling it had been a small graduation to bank robbery. Only Stan had been caught on the first job and ended in the prison.

"You look great, buddy," Al said in

greeting through the wire cage.

"You're looking good yourself," Stan answered, but he didn't mean it. Al was dressed in expensive, showy clothes and a cigar protruded from the corner of his mouth. But there seemed to be an intangible change in him. Nothing that Stan could put his finger on, but he didn't like the furtiveness of Aldrich's eyes or the flamboyant manner of his actions and speech. This new Al was not the person Stan had grown up with and loved like a brother.

"I'm doin' all right, too," Al said. "Wait till you get out! I've got a set-up that'll have us rolling in money." And he went on to explain a hidden canyon he and two others stayed in, to prey on the cattle of surrounding ranches.

Stan listened, but Al's enthusiasm left him cold. He'd had enough of "set-ups" and "deals-that-would-make-him-rich". He knew from experience that such situations were ninety per cent talk. In actuality Al and his partners lived in constant fear of being discovered. They spent their ill-gotten gains in tiny owlhoot towns that preyed on men of their kind. And one day they would be caught and sentenced to the same hell in which he was now living. No, he'd had his bellyful of that existence.

"Now remember," Al said in leaving, "go to Two Dance as soon as they let you go and I'll meet you there."

Stan said nothing and Al took his silence for acquiescence. But the husky, blond cowboy did not intend to meet Al in Two Dance. He wanted to explain to his pardner, and get Al to come with him and make a new start where they were not known. But he knew that if he voiced his thoughts, Aldrich would laugh and try to talk him out of his plans. Al did not have the experience to absorb the lesson Stan had learned; and so, much as he hated to do it, he knew he would have to go without his pardner.

THE REMAINING days of his term wore by in an agony of slowness. Then, one day, Stan was ushered into the warden's office. The official gave him a cigar and shook his hand.

"Sanders," he said, "you've been a model prisoner. If there's anything I can do to help you, let me know. Good luck. And I hope I won't see you back again."

"Thank you," Stan said grimly. "You won't see me here again! I promise you that."

Then, for the first time in five years, he found himself a free man. He took a deep breath of fresh air and inventoried himself. He had gone into prison at the age of twenty and he was now twenty-five. So far, he had accomplished nothing. But he was in good health, and from now on things would be different.

In the nearby town, he bought himself a new outfit; boots, levis, flannel shirt, and sombrero. He discarded the cheap clothing given him at the prison, and went out to get a job. Work was not easy to find for a released prisoner, but he managed to hire out as a hostler in the livery.

He worked in the stable for two months. At the end of that time, he had enough pay for a horse, saddle, and a small grubstake. He quit the job and headed the nose of his pony in the direction opposite the one to Two Dance. He was heading for a new life, and he was putting his past behind him.

He traveled westward for a month, taking his time and letting the sun and wind put the tan back on his face and the toughness into his body. He got back into the feel of the saddle and absorbed the headiness of freeness. And slowly he lost the discontent and bitterness endowed him by the penitentiary.

One day he came across a pass and entered a broad, golden valley. He stopped his mustang and let his eyes feast on the scene before him. Something about the rocky, timbered foothills, rolling meadowland, and gleaming river that wound through the valley struck a responsive chord in his

being, and he knew that here was his destination. Here, he would work out his destiny.

He could discern a small cluster of buildings near the river and he headed his mount for the town. He worked through the timber, across the foothills, and camped that night by a spring near the border of the meadowland. Next morning he rose early, breakfasted, and rode into the town near mid-morning.

It was a small town; several streets paralleled and intersected each other and the frame, sun-dried buildings had been built around and among these thoroughfares. Wagons and horses lined the hitchracks along the streets and the sidewalks were dotted with people about their day's business.

Stan halted his horse before a general store, dismounted, and looped his reins over the tie-rail. The sign over the store proclaimed that the building housed the Enfield General Store, from which he assumed that he was in the town of Enfield. He looked about for a moment, oriented himself, then moved across the walk toward the store.

Suddenly, a fusillade of shots sounded from down the street. Instinctively, he dived behind a watering trough. He twisted himself to let the trough shield him and peered around it.

Three men burst from the adobe bank building, guns blazing. They headed at a run for the hitchrack to swing aboard their horses.

But at that moment, a short, stocky man ran from the court house. Taking in the situation at a glance, his hands sped swiftly to his holsters and came up holding a pair of blue-steel and six-guns. The weapons thundered in a double reverberation.

The lead outlaw turned his horse. A bullet struck him in the middle and spun him from the mustang. The lawman fired again. The second owlhoot spurred his horse only to throw up his arms and topple from the saddle.

The third outlaw, meantime, was galloping along the street. The man with the sheriff's star on his vest ran into the thoroughfare and fired twice. The owlhoot's horse seemed to falter, then somersault, throwing the outlaw clear. The lawbreaker scrambled to his feet and raced along the street away from the sheriff and toward Stan.

The door of the feed store, just beyond the general store, opened and a black-haired girl ran out, almost into the outlaw's arms. He grabbed her and spun her around, shielding himself from the lawman. One hairy hand dug a sixgun from a holster and rammed the muzzle into the girl's side.

The lawman stopped, aghast at the sight of the girl in the outlaw's arms. The street was deserted now save for the three of them and Stan hidden behind the watering trough.

"Hold it, Sheriff!" The voice of the owlhoot was a raucous cry in the sudden stillness that enveloped the town. "One wrong move and the filly gets it!" The outlaw backed until he came up against the wall of the general store.

"What do you want?" The lawman, not wanting to risk the girl's life, was at the pleasure of the criminal.

"Throw down your gun!"

The sheriff obeyed.

"That's better!" The triumph was evident in the outlaw's voice. "Bring me two saddled horses. I'm going to take the filly along so you'll be sure and not follow."

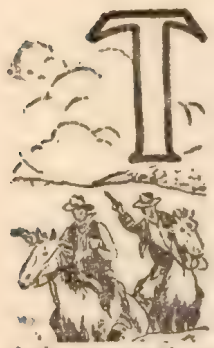
The lawman turned and shouted to

someone in the court house. A boy appeared and ran along the street toward the stable.

"While we wait," the owlhoot said, "let's get one thing clear! If anyone tries anything, I'll kill the girl."

Stan thought swiftly. To attempt a rescue might prove fatal to the girl. And yet, if the outlaw took her with him, she might meet a worse fate on the trail. He made a difficult decision.

2



THERE WAS nothing the sheriff could do, since he was under the eye of the outlaw. But Stan was hidden by a corner of the building. He signalled to the lawman, removed his spurs, and ran behind the other side of the general store. He paused to survey the building.

The store was a one-story affair with a false front. Stan moved along it to a rain barrel and climbed upon the cask. He could reach the edge of the roof then, and he pulled himself up until he lay prone upon the top.

Now he had to be careful, for at any sound that might warn him, the outlaw would shoot the girl. Stan began inching himself across the roof until he could look down upon the owlhoot and girl just below him.

He found himself stalemated. He was afraid to hazard a rescue for fear of causing the girl's death. Even if he shot the gunman, a reflex motion would send a bullet into her. He looked helplessly at the sheriff who understood his predicament.

The lawman hesitated. Down the street the boy was coming with the saddled horses. If he were to try something, it had to be soon, or the attempt would be too late.

A canvas sack of loot dropped by one of the outlaws lay by the sheriff's feet. He pointed to it and spoke to the owlhoot. "You might as well take this money along with you."

The outlaw chuckled. "Sure, Sheriff. Throw it over."

The lawman picked up the sack and threw it toward the owlhoot. It landed an arm's length away from the criminal.

The outlaw looked around, then with one arm about the girl, moved toward the money. He transferred the gun to his other hand, aimed it at the sheriff, and reached for the sack.

Stan acted. One arm on the edge of the roof, he vaulted over the side and dropped toward the owlhoot. He caught the criminal about the neck and the force of the fall threw them both to the ground.

The owlhoot was stunned and surprised for a moment. Stan scrambled to his feet, and as the owlhoot roared with rage and started to right himself, swung with all the force of his being. The blow caught the outlaw on the chin and threw him senseless to the dirt.

Stan straightened to find himself the center of a crowd of people. Several women clustered around the girl who was weak with shock and led her away. The lawman shackled the owlhoot's hands and pulled him to his feet as he regained consciousness. He began to lead him away, then stopped and looked at Stan. "I'd like to see you in my office, young fellar."

Stan followed him to the combination office and jail and waited while the sheriff locked the criminal in a cell. Then the lawman came back, sank into a chair, and pointed to one for Stan.

"That was using your head, son. If it hadn't been for you, I don't know what we'd have done," the sheriff said.

Stan mumbled something, flushed, and looked down at the floor. Modest, he was embarrassed by attention of this kind.

"What are you doing?" the sheriff asked.

"Nothing. I'm just drifting."

"Would you be interested in a deputy's job?"

Stan started, then laughed. "Sher-

iff, you're talking to a man who just served five years for armed robbery."

The lawman studied him for several moments. "Son," he said kindly, "I like your truthfulness and I'll respect your confidence. I'm not interested in your past life. Everybody makes mistakes. You made yours and you paid your penalty. As far as the law and myself's concerned, you're just as good as anybody else. I am interested in your future. I like the way you handle yourself. I think you have guts and brains and that's what I want backing me up. If you want to go straight and are interested in a lawman's badge, the job's yours."

Stan hesitated. He hadn't dared dream of a sheriff's job because of his record. However, he liked using his fists and guns better than doing the monotonous, dreary work of a cowpuncher. The more he turned the sheriff's offer over in his mind, the more it appealed to him. "You just hired yourself a deputy," he said, grinning.

STAN FELL easily into the routine of a deputy's life, and he discovered that he liked it. He enjoyed doing the work, the satisfaction of knowing it was well done, and the knowledge that the townspeople approved of him. He liked making his rounds and exchanging pleasantries with the circle of friends he had quickly acquired. But he liked most of all the knowledge that he was living within society, the freedom from fear, the escape from the envious, sullen, bitter brotherhood of the owlhoot. It was almost as though he had been born anew.

He got himself a room at a boarding house and after he had been working a short time, bought himself a good horse and a new saddle which he kept at the livery. He slowly acquired the feeling of belonging; he had sunk his roots in this community and was now growing, as it were.

Only one thing worried him, and that was Al. Aldrich was his only link with his past life, and a bond almost of brotherhood existed between them. They had shared their last blanket and fought each other's battles during their earlier years and such ties are not easily broken.

Al had made a place for him in his band of outlaws and had expected him upon his release from prison. Some time had elapsed since he had been turned free and his friend, worried about him, must surely have discovered that he had been released. He hoped that his pardner would let well enough alone and not seek for him further. But he knew Al too well for that. And when the outlaw did come after him, as he inevitably would, how could he explain his reason for deserting his pardner and sneaking off to lead an honest life?

He returned to the office from lunch one day to find the black-haired girl he had rescued from the owlhoot waiting for him. She rose as he entered and extended her hand, man fashion. "Mr. Sanders," she said shyly, "my name is Adeline Albee."

Stan was so embarrassed he pulled off his Stetson with his right hand, then clumsily shifted it to his left so he could shake her hand. He flushed and gave her his name.

"I've come to thank you," she said, coloring slightly, "for saving me from that horrible outlaw."

Stan hung his head. "Aw, that's all right, ma'am," he mumbled confusedly. "I was glad to do it." He had had little contact with the opposite sex before this, and he felt inferior whenever he came in contact with a woman.

Sensing that she was in command of the situation, Adeline sat down and smiled prettily at him. "My friends call me Ada," she said, "and I wish you would."

"Thanks," he blurted. "Everybody calls me Stan." He moved over and sat down on the edge of the desk. They were alone, as the sheriff had sensed the possibility of the girl's visit and departed before Stan had arrived.

Examining Ada from the corner of his eye, Stan found that he was attracted to her. She was of medium

height with a well built and rounded body. Her thick black hair hung attractively and carelessly to her shoulders and her brown eyes seemed to have a sparkle of their own.

"Mother would like to have you come to supper tonight," she said. "I hope you will find the time convenient."

Stan had not had any time off since he accepted the job of deputy and he knew there would be no difficulty on that score. But he felt that he shouldn't accept the invitation, yet he found himself doing so.

"Good!" Ada exclaimed. "Supper's at seven o'clock and it's the Albee Ranch, five miles down the road. You can't miss it."

He escorted her to her horse and watched her mount and ride off. But as he made his way back to the office, he cursed himself bitterly for agreeing to attend the meal. He was a man with a record, a jailbird! He knew that it would take very little to make him fall in love with Adeline, and that was something he had no right to do.

However, he looked forward to seeing the girl again for the rest of the day. He got a haircut and shave, bathed himself, and dressed in new clothes. He rode out to the ranch timing himself to arrive at exactly seven.

THE ALBEE Ranch was a medium-sized spread with the house nestling in a grove of cottonwoods. Ada ran from the porch to meet him and instructed one of the hands to care for his horse. She led him into the house and introduced him to her parents.

Mrs. Albee was a buxom, motherly woman who made him feel at home. Her husband, a tall, spare man with a twinkle in his eyes, seemed ill-at-ease in the house as men of the outdoors usually are. Stan sat and talked with him while Ada helped her mother put the meal on the table.

They sat down to table, and the rancher said Grace in a practised voice. The meal consisted of roast beef, mashed potatoes, and new vegetables and was followed by apple pie and strong coffee. Stan had seldom eaten cookery of this kind and Mrs. Albee urged second helpings on him. Adeline sat across from him, dutifully obeyed her mother, and exchanged secret smiles with Stan.

There seemed to be a happy family atmosphere in the home, something Stan had never known, and he was struck by it. He would have given his right arm to have grown to maturity in a home like this, and the thought only served to remind him that he was an outsider, a man with a record, and that he didn't belong here.

After the meal, Mrs. Albee made her husband help her with the dishes and Stan and Ada found themselves free. Darkness had fallen and they went out onto the porch in the warm

night and sat down. At first, Stan was self-conscious, but Adeline started talking and soon he began telling her of his dreams and ambitions. He wasn't going to be satisfied with a sheriff's job; as soon as he acquired enough experience, he was going to get a job with a cattleman's association or possibly even the state or federal government. There was no telling how far he could go if he applied himself.

Adeline encouraged him in his ambitions, and Stan discovered how much fun it was just to be with her. The evening went by surprisingly fast. Mr. and Mrs. Albee came out on the porch after they had finished the dishes and the talk became general. But Stan enjoyed it nevertheless, and soon it was time for him to go.

He thanked the father and mother

for inviting him to the meal and Ada walked with him to where the puncher had left his horse. He thanked her and said goodnight and stood for a moment looking at her. It would be so easy to kiss her and she seemed to sway closer as though inviting him to do so. He hesitated, then swung aboard his horse. With a wave of his hand, he galloped into the night.

He spurred the pony onward, letting him run into the wind, and slowly the feeling of frustration which had overwhelmed him as he mounted faded somewhat and he began to reason.

There was no use in his thinking seriously about Adeline because she was not for him. She probably had a boy friend, someone from her own strata of society, and even if she hadn't, she would soon find one. She was merely grateful to him because he had saved her from the outlaw. If she did think of him in a romantic way, as soon as she learned of his past she would have nothing more to do with him.

He rode back to the livery and left his horse. On his way back to the boarding house, he went by the sheriff's office and stopped in to see if anything had happened. The lawman leaned back in his chair at sight of Stan and grinned. "Did you enjoy the meal?" he asked.

"It was fine," Stan said shortly, hoping that Sheriff Edgecomb would change the subject.

"Adeline's a good girl," the lawman continued. "I've known her folks all my life. Why, I used to bounce her on my knee when she was a little girl."

Stan was wondering how long he would have to listen to the sheriff when a puncher burst through the door. "Come quick, Sheriff!" he bawled. "There's a fight at the *Gold Dollar Saloon!*"

Edgecomb grabbed his hat and he and Stan ran into the warm night. They raced along the dusty street feeling the acrid tang of the silt in their nostrils. The sounds of the fight were audible long before they reached the saloon. Stan, being the younger, got to the batwing doorway of the building first and pushed his way through.

3

A TANGLE of struggling men surged across the cleared area before the long bar. Three men seemed to be closing in on a fourth, and as Stan watched, the victim went down and the others fell on him.

Stan charged into the melee. He pulled the first man from the group and spun him around. The belligerent came at the deputy, fists swinging. Sanders covered, ducked, and sank a left into the man's stomach. The assailant grunted, doubled, and Stan hit him on the chin with a right. He went down, cold.

Stan spun only to have someone leap on his back and dig spurs into his thighs. Gritting his teeth against the pain, Stan caught the man's legs and tried to twist himself free. From the corner of his eye, he saw Edgecomb charge the third man who was turning on Stan.

But the man on his back stuck like a burr. His spurs raked along Stan's legs and his teeth sank into the deputy's ear. Almost blind with pain, Stan turned and slammed himself backward into the bar. The jar caught his attacker in the back and he shouted with pain and loosened his hold on the deputy.

Stan twisted himself free and turned to face his opponent. The assailant had recovered his wits, and lowering his head, charged. Stan dodged and extended his foot. The man veered and dived into him and they went to the floor together.

For a moment, the shock of the fall stunned Stan and he lay still. Then his opponent's knee rammed into his groin, sending a wave of pain through his body, and a thumb probed for his eye.

Doubling from the agony in his

groin, Stan caught the man's hand and twisted. The belligerent howled with pain and flung himself away from the deputy. Stan scrambled to his feet, and as the assailant tried to rise, took him in the chin with his knee. The man went back, senseless, to sprawl on the floor.

Stan turned to see the sheriff slam the third fighter against the bar with a blow to the mid-section. As his opponent recovered, Edgecomb stepped into him with a left and right. The brawler went back against the bar, hung there for a moment, then collapsed in a heap.

Stan and the lawman stood for a moment recovering their winds; then the sheriff turned to a wide-eyed bystander. "What happened, Henry?"

"I don't know," the spectator said. "The three Pooler boys was drinking at the bar and this stranger comes in. He stands beside them and starts talking. First thing I know, fists start flying."

Stan turned to look at the stranger who had gone to the floor just as he had come through the batwings. His heart sank as he recognized Ken Rand, an acquaintance from Two Dance.

The marshal of Enfield came bustling in as the men on the floor began to stir. "What happened?" he asked.

"Nothing!" Edgecomb said in a disgusted voice. "Stan and I have been doing some more of your work for you. Lock these fellows up."

The marshal was a short, fat man, a good politician but a poor law officer. He got by because the sheriff's office performed most of his difficult duties. As Stan and his senior left, the marshal was snapping handcuffs on the wrists of the unconscious men.

THE NEXT day he reported for duty hoping to be assigned a job elsewhere until the marshal had released his prisoners. But that was not to be. The sheriff glanced at him and said, "You better hang around town today. I've got to take a ride down the valley."

Cursing his luck, Stan settled himself in a chair. Within a short time, the marshal came to release the prisoners. The Pooler brothers left, scowling at him. Then Rand came sauntering out of the jail into the office. He started as he saw Stan.

"Sanders, you old bronc-stomper!" he exclaimed. He grabbed the deputy's hand and pumped it vigorously. "This where you been keeping yourself?"

Stan nodded. "Yeah. I'm deputy here."

"Imagine that!" Rand settled himself in a chair and proceeded to roll a smoke. "Stan Sanders, a deputy sheriff!"

Stan said nothing.

"You know," Rand said, lighting the cigaret and taking a deep drag, "Al's been hunting all over for you." He chuckled. "I can't wait to see his face when I tell him you're a lawman!"

As soon as Rand had left, Stan pondered the advisability of quitting his job and moving on. He hated to do so because he liked his new life, and even though he wouldn't admit it to himself, he rebelled at the thought of never seeing Adeline again. If he did move on, sooner or later it was inevitable that Al would find him. Therefore, he decided, he might as well have it out with his former pardner here as elsewhere.

The prospect of facing Al over a lawman's badge unnerved him more than he had thought possible. How could he make his pardner understand his feelings? What would Al do should his hurt turn into an antagonistic hatred?

As the days passed however, the problem began to lose its imperativeness and the one of Adeline to worry him. The black-haired beauty began to come into Enfield regularly to see him, and his visits to the Albee Ranch became more and more frequent. Despite himself, he found he was falling in love with her and that the feeling was reciprocated. He fell into the habit of attending church with her and then spending the entire Sunday with the

Albees at their ranch. Mr. and Mrs. Albee looked on him with favor and it soon became known throughout the valley that she was his girl.

Mentally, Stan fought a delaying-action battle with himself as he found he was sliding into the time-evolved custom of courting. He determined, before he accepted one invitation to supper, to quit the relationship before it got more involved—only to find himself agreeing to another rendezvous and determining to make the break at the next opportunity. Finally, he realized that the courtship could not continue much longer without one of them getting seriously hurt, and he decided to make the break the next Sunday.

On the Sabbath, he called for Adeline in a buckboard, as was now his habit, to take her to church. It was an unusually fine summer day, with a bright sun overhead and a comfortable breeze from the mountains. Ada was in a gay mood and the trip to and from the church was a happy and exciting one. Adeline had planned a picnic for the day and Stan drove to a quiet spot by the river where the girl spread the lunch. They ate the fried chicken, potatoes, pickles, and cake she had prepared, and drank milk which had been kept cold in a thermos jug. Stan kept postponing and dreading the announcement he had composed in his mind until the day had almost gone by; then, he realized that he had to make it.

They had gone rowing in a boat someone had left tied to the bank and while Stan was making it fast, Ada went to pick herself a nosegay of wild flowers. He finished his task and began pacing the river bank, nerving himself for the ordeal. Presently she came hurrying toward him with the flowers. She ran up to him to show the bouquet for his admiration, when the look on his face startled her.

"What's the matter, honey?"

Stan looked away. He had made up his mind to hurt her as little as possible, but to make the parting inevitable. "I've put off telling you as long as I could," he said stiffly, "but there was a girl back in Two Dance where I come from."

She laughed in rather an unnatural way. "I know you've been out with other girls. I'd think it funny if you hadn't."

"Well, that's not what I mean," he said lamely. "You see, I was engaged to her, and we—"

He stopped as he saw the hurt look on her face. He wouldn't hurt her for the world; yet, he couldn't continue without doing so. He'd have to think of some other way of effecting a parting. But not now; he had to have time to think. He smiled reassuringly at her.

"—were going to be married," he went on, "and she just wrote, breaking our engagement."

Her smile was like the sun breaking through storm clouds. "That's too bad," she said softly. "I'm awfully sorry."

"Don't be," he said glibly. "It was one of those adolescent things. I know now I never really cared for her."

They stood looking at each other in an embarrassed way, then as if by mutual consent, moved toward each other. Then she was in his arms and Stan was kissing her and it was as though he had never kissed a girl before.

AFTER A time he held her at arm's length and he knew that she was waiting for him to propose. But he did not know what to do. He knew that he loved her and wanted her with all his heart, and yet did he have the right to ask her to marry him? He was a jailbird and even though she might in the strength of her emotion overlook the fact, what of her parents and friends? They had accepted him at face value, but the chances were that they would react differently once they learned of his past.

He moved away silently and they loaded the picnic things into the buckboard. They climbed into the wagon, and as darkness started to fall, began the drive back to the ranch. Adeline sat very close to him and after a time he put his arm around her and she laid her head on his shoulder. He kissed her at the door and afterward drove toward Enfield, black despair eating into his very soul.

Why was it that a mocking Providence played such tricks on a man? Why couldn't he have had someone to guide him during his earlier years so that now he could go to Adeline with a clear conscience and ask her to marry him? If only he'd had brains enough to realize that the trail he was riding had only one end!

Depression settled over him. He left the wagon at the livery stable and went to his room at the boarding house. He was mentally weary and he fell into a troubled sleep.

4

HE WOKE early and lay abed, his first thoughts of Adeline. What was he to do? In the cold light of dawn he saw that they loved each other. And even though he had been to prison, he was leading a different life now. He had made his mistake and paid the penalty for it. Wasn't he entitled to the same happiness as anyone else? But the decision was not wholly his. He dreaded the idea, but he made up his mind to tell Adeline and her parents the truth about himself and let them decide as to whether or not they wanted him for a husband and son-in-law.

Now that the problem, as far as he was concerned, was settled, he felt better. Doubt and indecision ceased to torture him. He dressed and reported for duty at the jail. The sheriff assigned him to the town for the day, and he went to a restaurant for breakfast. Afterward he made a round of the saloons and pleasure houses. He entered the *Gold Dollar Saloon* to see a familiar figure lounging against the bar. His heart sank as he recognized Al, and his former pardner smiled at him. "I was wondering when you'd get around," Al said.

A feeling of being cornered, as though fate had backed him against a wall, oppressed Stan. He smiled weakly at Al. "Let's go where we can talk," he said, and led him to a corner table.

They sat down and Al smiled at him. "You're looking good, buddy. What kind of a game you in now?"

Stan ignored the question. "I thought you had a set-up in Two Dance?"

Al shrugged. "You know how it is. The sheriff got smelling around and one day he found our canyon. He brought back a posse and we had to hightail to save our hides."

The same old story, Stan reflected. A "set-up" that couldn't last. Sooner or later the law moved in and Al moved onward to a bigger and better deal—to hear him tell it—only to eventually move on again.

"Oh yeah, buddy," Al grinned. "How come you didn't join up with us? We were waiting for you, you know."

Stan looked down at the table. Here it was. The long dreaded question had to be answered now. "I don't know," he said. "I wanted a change of scenery so I came up here. I guess that's the reason."

"You could have let us know," Al said. "We were worried about you. We didn't know what had happened."

Stan smiled wryly at the idea of an outlaw worried about a lawman. "Where's your men?" he asked.

"There's a reward out for Porky Nesbitt and Black Johnny, so I left them up in the hills."

Stan nodded. He remembered Al's men as a couple of ne'er-do-wells who had hung around the saloons of Two Dance.

There was a short silence as they studied each other. Stan discovered that during the years he had been separated from Al he had grown away from him so that now his former pardner was almost a stranger to him. At the same time, however, he remembered that he and Al had experienced so much together that there was a bond between them that could never be broken.

"What are you going to do now?" he asked.

Al grinned knowingly. "Aren't you going to cut me in?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You don't have to play games with me. This is your pardner, Al, remember? I know that you wouldn't be wearing that star on your vest if there wasn't something in the wind."

So that was it. Al had immediately assumed that he had taken the deputy's job with an ulterior motive in mind.

Stan shook his head. "There's nothing in the wind. I'm riding the straight trail from now on."

Al laughed loudly. "That's a good one! Who do you think you're kidding?" he asked, a trace of irritation in his voice.

Stan looked away. The other had spent so many years on the owlhoot that he believed nobody. And suddenly he knew that he could argue until he was black in the face and still Al would be unconvinced. "Have it your own way," he said, a little angrily. "But I'm a deputy now, and that's what I'm going to stay!"

Now Al looked away, little angry lines working the corners of his mouth. After a time he looked at Stan. "This bank looks like a set-up," he said. "Suppose I work up a plan for cracking it. Will you come in on it with us?"

Stan slowly and firmly shook his head. "No! And I'm warning you. If you try anything on that bank, I'll do everything in my power to stop you."

Al's eyes narrowed angrily. "What kind of a man are you? You mean you'd turn on your friends and pardner?"

"I've chosen my trail," Stan said firmly, "and I aim to ride it. If I have to draw on you in the performance of my duty, then I'll do it!"

Al studied him as though he couldn't believe his senses.

"You see," Stan hurried to explain, "that five years in jail was hell." He had to make Al understand. "And the life we were leading! We weren't happy. We sneaked around owlhoot towns paying twice as much for things we needed, always afraid we'd get caught. Since I've—"

"Hogwash!" Al leaped to his feet. "I don't want to listen to any more of your mealy-mouth talk. You've made yourself plain enough!"

"But, Al—" Stan stood to face his pardner.

Al pointed his finger at the other and jammed the extremity into Stan's chest. "If that's the way you feel, understand this! If you ever come after me for the law, come with your gun smoking, 'cause mine will sure as hell be out of leather!"

Stan saw that Al could not be reasoned with. The owlhoot paused to give effect to his words, then walked slowly out of the saloon. The deputy followed him to the door and watched him swing astride his horse. And Al, looking straight ahead, spurred his pony to a canter.

STAN WALKED out onto the sidewalk and watched his former pardner diminish into the distance and disappear around a bend. Then the dep-

uty walked across the street to his office, a great emptiness growing inside him.

He tossed his hat at a set of elkhorns nailed to a wall and sank into the chair behind the desk. He had just cut himself away from a man who meant as much to him as life itself. Al had risked his life for Stan many times in the past and would cheerfully have done so again. Only now they were enemies.

He reviewed his stand and knew he could have acted in no other way. Their parting had been inevitable. Now he prayed he would never have to go after his pardner. But Al had been deeply hurt by his words, and he knew that the owlhoot in this frame of mind was likely to do anything to strike back at the deputy. And he was very much afraid that Al would do something that would force him into the saddle to trail his former pardner and meet him face to face across a brace of smoking sixguns!

Two days went by, and though Stan kept an eye out for Al or his two henchmen, he did not see them. Still unsure of the situation, he began to breathe easier. He hoped that Al had thought over their talk and decided to move on. Secretly, he knew better, yet he tried to convince himself that this was true.

Actually, he spent more time worrying about how the Albees would take his confession. For, now that he had admitted to himself that he loved Adeline, he realized just how much in love with her he was. She was the finest, dearest, sweetest girl in the world and there was no other like her. On the days on which he knew he would see her, he woke with gladness in his heart and counted the minutes until he was in her company. The days in between were unimportant, but they were happily spent in thinking about her.

He convinced himself that his prison term would be no obstacle to marrying the girl. He figured that if he explained the circumstances to Adeline and her parents, they would understand and it would make no difference. The idea of not telling them occurred to him, but he was too honest to even consider the thought.

He was going out to supper, as was his habit on Wednesday nights, and he determined to settle the matter. His deputy's salary was enough for them to live on for the present, and as soon as he had a little more experience, he could get a better paying position. And with Adeline at his side, he'd go to the very top of his chosen profession.

The Albees treated him like a member of the family now, and he left his horse in the corral and waved at a couple of the punchers who were coming in from their day's work. He met Adeline on the porch, and laughing and talking, they went into the house and he greeted her parents.

While Mrs. Albee and Ada were putting the meal on the table, Stan sat in the living room and talked to the rancher. He liked Mr. Albee, as he did the mother, and soon Adeline was calling them to the table.

The meal was the pleasant, family affair Stan had grown to love. The older couple discussed the everyday topics that had assumed importance in their lives; and Stan and Ada shared that secret understanding and intimacy which seemed to be theirs alone, and yet which is somewhat sadly overlooked by older people who recognize it, and remember when they too experienced the same thing.

After the meal, Adeline insisted on washing the dishes and Stan helped her. When they had finished, it was dark and the deputy suggested a stroll in the moonlight. The girl agreed and they left the parents on the porch and walked toward a huge boulder on the hill that overlooked the ranch. Stan helped her to the top of the rock and they seated themselves where they had a good view of the valley.

Stan had decided to reveal his past to the girl and let her tell her parents. But now that the time had come, he was not so confident as to the reception his story would get. A thousand

doubts assailed him, and yet he knew that he had to try and make her understand.

He turned awkwardly to Adeline and suddenly his throat felt as though there were a rope around it. He picked up a small stick, worked it nervously in his hands and began. "I don't know how to say this." His words were awkward and strained and he tried to correct them, but it was impossible to do so. His heart was beating very violently. "I want to ask you to marry me. But first I want to tell you about myself."

She said nothing and this diminished his hopes. All of a sudden he was not sure of how she would take his story. But he had gone so far that he could not stop. Doggedly, he went on. "You see, I never had any parents. I grew up in the wrong crowd, I guess, and I started riding the owlhoot trail when I was just a kid. It wasn't too serious. We rustled a few cows and—one day we held up a bank! They caught me and sentenced me and I spent five years in prison!"

He felt her start, but he didn't dare look at her.

"You see, I was a wild kid. I didn't know any better..."

"I don't know how my parents will take that," she said in a strange voice.

She should have been assuring him that a prison term made no difference to her! Suddenly he knew he had been crazy to even hope to marry this girl. He was not her kind. Besides, her parents would never let her marry a jailbird! He flushed with shame as he saw how foolish he had been. He could not stay here another moment and make a bigger fool of himself.

He sprang off the boulder and hurried down the slope toward the corral.

"Stan!" Adeline called behind him. "Stan!"

But he paid no attention to her. He rushed blindly to the corral, swung into the saddle of his mustang, and spurred toward town.

He could think of nothing. He only wanted to get as far away as possible. He looked up in what seemed to be a moment to discover that he was at the livery. He left the pony with the hostler and went to his room. He threw himself on the bed and wondered what to do.

5

SOMEHOW, Stan dropped off to sleep and he woke to find the sun shining through the window of his room. He thought immediately of Adeline and what had happened the night before. He felt like a man who has been sentenced to prison for life. Living without Ada would be a cheerless existence.

He got up, poured water from the pitcher on the small table into the dish beside it, and washed. The cold water made him feel more awake, and he left the house and started along the street.

He had been crazy to even hope to marry Adeline. But now he understood his position. The emotional shock was wearing off and the almost unbearable mental pain was beginning. He would always love her, he knew, but he could never call on her again. He might see her on the street and speak to her but that would be the extent of their relationship.

He thought again of quitting his job and moving on to begin over again in some other town. But he knew better. A man could not lick a problem by running away from it. The mental anguish of knowing he had lost the girl was almost more than he could bear. He had his work, he consoled himself, but that was small comfort. He thought of the long, lonely, cheerless life ahead of him and shuddered.

He suddenly started as he realized that the town was teeming with midmorning activity. He pulled out his watch and looked at it. It was ten o'clock. He had slept longer than was

his habit. His mind, exhausted by last night's ordeal, had rested long past the hour at which he had trained it to awake.

He was nearing the bank when something made him look across the street at the hitchrack. He didn't want to believe his eyes.

There were three horses at the tie-rail and one of them was the gray gelding Al Aldrich had ridden the day Stan had spoken with him. And nearby slouched in an assumed indolent pose was the stocky figure of Porky Nesbitt.

Instantly Stan knew that at this very moment Al and Black Johnny were holding up the bank. His first impulse was to turn and hurry for the sheriff, but something warned him. Porky Nesbitt knew him and at this very moment had him under surveillance. At one suspicious move, the gunman would shoot him, for the owlhoot would know that the robbery was discovered. Stan's only chance was in playing dumb.

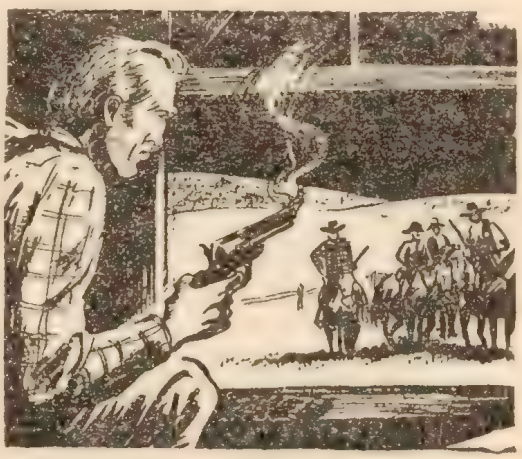
He continued along the street as though he sensed nothing suspicious. From a corner of his eye, he saw that Nesbitt's hand was on his gun and that the outlaw had but to tip his holster to shoot.

As he neared the bank, however, he knew that the test was coming. One of the outlaws was undoubtedly covering the occupants of the bank and the door. He might shoot Stan as the deputy entered his range of vision. Or Porky, not wanting to take a chance on the holdup being discovered, might drop him in his tracks before he reached the building.

Stan approached the bank, watching the other citizens of Enfield going about their business blissfully unaware of the robbery being staged under their very noses. Nearer the bank he came, and nearer. At any moment he might be shot. The hackles on his neck rose as he expected to feel the bone-shattering impact of a bullet. Then he was going past the door and beyond it and he breathed a sigh of relief.

He knew that Nesbitt's vigilance had relaxed a trifle now, and as he started across the mouth of the alley between the blacksmith shop and the feed store, he suddenly leaped sideways into the alley and behind the protection of the feed store wall. A gun exploded across the street and Porky's bullet slammed into the wall of the blacksmith shop, just short of his flying boot heel. Stan swept off his hat, drew his gun, and fell prone behind the corner of the building.

Pandemonium had broken loose on the street. The townspeople began shouting and running for the protection of their homes. Within moments, the street was clear.



NESBITT sprang into the saddle of his mustang and the reins of the other horses were in his hand. He spurred his mount cruelly as he urged it toward the bank. Stan triggered his first shot. The bullet whined among the legs of the horses and the animals became frightened and reared, fighting the reins.

The door of the bank flew open and Al and Black Johnny came running from the building, guns flaming. They raced toward the horses. The street became a snarling area of hot lead as some of the citizens began firing from the buildings.

Stan braced his gun against the plank sidewalk before him and took careful aim at one of the fleeing forms. The man turned his head for a moment and he saw that it was Al. And

suddenly he felt sick. He was shooting at the man he loved as a brother. His hand trembled violently and when he triggered, the slug sang wide of its mark.

The door of the sheriff's office swung open and Sheriff Edgecomb came rushing from the building. The lawman took in the situation at a glance. He dug for his guns and ducked behind the corner of a building.

Black Johnny managed to swing aboard the saddle of his mustang. He bent low over the animal's neck and urged it along the street. Porky fell in behind him, and as they thundered through the thoroughfare, they emptied their guns at Stan.

The deputy flattened against the wall and the shots, ineffective with the hurried aiming, sprinkled the area around him like hail. Stan scrambled to his knees after they had gone and triggered after them. But the moving figures made a difficult target.

Al Aldrich, meantime, was having trouble with his horse. He finally managed to get a foot into the stirrup and lift himself astride. He turned the nose of the pony and suddenly one of the sheriff's bullets slammed him against the neck of the mustang. He hung there for a moment, as though he could not right himself.

Edgecomb came from his cover and ran toward Aldrich.

But the owlhoot suddenly lifted an arm and his revolver spoke. The sheriff stopped, as though he had run into an invisible wall. For a moment he fought to remain upright, then he collapsed into the dust, his guns falling from his hands.

Horrified, Stan could only watch. Al weakly caressed his mustang's flanks with his spurs. The animal broke into a gallop and thundered along the thoroughfare. Horse and rider swept by Stan and out onto the open prairie.

The deputy ran from the alley toward his chief. He knelt beside Edgecomb. The lawman's face was pale and his pulse very weak. Aldrich's bullet had taken him through the stomach and it was evident that the wound was fatal.

Edgecomb's eyes fluttered and his lips opened. "You're a good boy, Stan," he whispered. "Go get 'em." Then he seemed to stiffen and his pulse was no more.

Stan bowed his head, and when he looked up, his lips were set in a grim line. Edgecomb had given him the chance to go straight and he had kept confidential the fact that he had served a sentence in the penitentiary. He had done as much for him as he would have done for his own son. Now he was dead.

Al had killed Edgecomb and Al and his men had held up the Enfield bank. If he was to be a lawman, his duty was clear before him!

A GROUP of townspeople had gathered about the body of the sheriff. Stan pushed his way blindly through them to confront the portly figure of the marshal coming from the shelter of a building. He felt the disgust of a brave man for a coward and started to brush by. But the marshal stopped him. "You want me to help organize your posse?" he asked, as though he wanted to work his way back into Stan's good graces.

But the husky deputy was too emotionally disturbed to organize a posse. "I'm going after them alone. You get a posse together and follow my trail."

He watched the lawman's eyes reflect his fear at taking the trail himself and saw him open his mouth to protest. But Stan gave him no opportunity to say the words, for he brushed by him and made his way to the livery.

He saddled his horse mechanically, swiftly, and efficiently. He struck a carbine into his boot, reloaded his pistols, and swung into the saddle. Looking neither to right nor left, he spurred along the street and out of the town.

The outlaw's trail was easy to follow. The fugitives, in a hurry to put as much distance between pursuit and themselves as possible, had taken no pains to hide their trace. The tracks of

the three horses led in a straight line for the foothills of the Powderhorn Range that bordered the valley on the south.

Every now and then, Stan saw traces of blood on the trail and he knew that Al's wound was bleeding. How seriously his pardner had been hit, he did not know, but the wound gave him the advantage of slowing his quarry a little, at least.

His mustang galloped at top speed after the fugitives. Occasionally he glanced along his back trail to see if he could spot the posse, but swelling meadowland hid Enfield from his view with no sign of his pursuers. He knew that the timid marshal would be in no hurry to take the trail and expose himself to danger, therefore he discounted the possibility of immediate help from that quarter.

The sun reached its zenith and began to sink westward. Stan pushed his mount as fast as possible without endangering the animal, but the owlhoots still maintained a comfortable lead. He began to encounter more signs of blood, which indicated that Al's wound was giving the outlaw trouble.

Before him now, he saw the first broken evidences of the foothills. And as he plunged heedlessly into the wooded hillocks and gullies, he realized that here the fugitives could easily hide, bushwhack him, and continue into the mountains with a good chance of eluding the posse.

But that was a chance he had to take. The trail led deeper into the undulating hills and the travel became slower and more difficult. He paused more often now to blow his horse and test the surrounding forest with his senses.

He began to grow uneasy. Something about the silence of the foothills keyed his nerves with a grim warning. Al was losing even more blood, and he knew that the outlaws could not keep up the killing pace they had been setting. He drew the carbine from its boot and proceeded more cautiously, anticipating a trap of some sort.

But the afternoon wore on and the trail led even deeper into the foothills. He had given up hoping for the posse to catch up with him and wondered cynically how far it would venture into the forest. Hunger and thirst began to plague him and he remembered that he hadn't eaten since the night before. He thought of Adeline and the twinge of sweet pain set up a longing within him. But his subconscious mind was fixed firmly on the sign ahead of him.

The trail suddenly led into a draw, and here Stan grew suspicious. He dismounted and hid his mustang in a clump of pine trees. Removing his spurs, he hung them from the pommel of his saddle, and made his way warily into the draw.

The trace was very plain, suspiciously so. It seemed as though the outlaws wanted to make sure he didn't miss it. He advanced along the bottom of the draw and his senses began to tingle. A man who lives in constant danger seems to know when trouble is near, and so it was with Stan. Somewhere, just ahead of him, was a trap. He knew it, as an animal knows how to swim.

6

HE REACHED a bend in the draw. He paused to study the way ahead. After a moment or two he slipped forward to stop behind another bit of concealment. As he did so, he heard a sound behind him.

He whirled. Al leaned against the trunk of a tree, his face white, a six-shooter covering Stan. Beside him stood Black Johnny, a rifle muzzle yawning at Stan. Sound came from the brush ahead, and a grinning Porky Nesbitt came into view. Stan had followed Porky, while the other two had waited for him to walk into their trap.

The same devil-may-care grin twisted Al's face. "You used to be a better

man than that, buddy. Walk right into a trap! You're slipping."

Black Johnny scowled. "We ain't got time to waste. Let me plug him and we'll get going."

Al's voice cracked like a whip. He spoke without looking at Johnny. "Shut up! I'm roddin' this outfit." A spasm of pain caused by the effort of the emotion crossed his features and his gun dropped to his side. After a moment, he straightened. "Damn, sheriff!" he said, weakly.

Stan felt concern for his pardner. He found it hard to remember that he had sworn to bring this man in. Yet he had his duty to perform. He had made his choice and there was no turning back.

"We didn't kill you," Al said weakly, "because of old time's sake. We're going to give you one more chance. Throw in with us and you get a split of the loot. We'll keep on hightailing and lose that posse before they know what's happened."

Stan shook his head. "I gave you my answer back in Enfield. It still stands."

Al considered his words and a bitter grin worked his pale face. "It's funny," he said sadly, "but the further along life's trail a man goes, the lonelier he gets. All right, buddy. I'll give you a chance to save your hide. Turn back, give me your word not to follow, and we'll let you go back alive."

Slowly Stan shook his head. "I'm sorry, Al. I want to more than you realize. But I can't. I've sworn to bring you in, and I'd be telling you a lie if I promised anything different."

Al's wound started to bleed again, and the outlaw cursed. Porky managed to stop the flow and Aldrich looked back at Stan, his face even more pale. "You're not giving me much choice, buddy," he said, weakly.

Black Johnny's finger seemed to tighten on the trigger of his rifle. "I know what to do!" he said, in a deadly voice.

"That's enough of that!" Al snapped, with as much authority as he could muster. "Tie him up. We'll leave him for—"

Aldrich's strength seemed to leave him. He fell back against the tree, fighting to keep conscious. Porky and Black Johnny looked at him.

Impulsively, Stan started toward his pardner, but Black Johnny stopped him with the rifle. "We got no time to lose!" he snarled at Nesbitt. "We got to get him on a horse and away from here before that posse catches up with us."

"What about him?" Porky indicated Stan.

"I'll take care of him, right now!" Black Johnny's finger tightened, and the carbine exploded, its flat echo reverberating through the hills.

But Al had lurched to his feet at Black Johnny's words; and as the owl-hoot shot. Aldrich threw himself in front of the gun. The slug caught him in the chest, whirled him half around, and slammed him to the ground.

For a moment, the three of them stared horrified at Al's body. Then Stan threw himself backward and scuttled behind a boulder as Black Johnny's second bullet struck the rock and ricochetted into space.

A cold rage swept over Stan, and his movements were swift and sure. His guns were in his hands and he sprang to his feet away from the cover of the boulder. The look on his face gave him a terrifying aspect, and Black Johnny's next shot was wide of its mark.

Stan triggered, and his bullets took Johnny through the stomach and sat him on the ground. The rifle fell from his hands and he looked stupidly at the deputy.

Nesbitt's guns were in his hands, but the shooting of Aldrich and the grim figure of Stan unnerved him. He fired once, the shots going wild, then screamed for mercy. But too late. Stan had already fired, and Porky fell face forward into the pine-needled ground.

Black Johnny looked at the dead body of Nesbitt and reached for the rifle. This was the man who'd shot Al! Stan emptied his pistols into Johnny. The outlaw fell backward, then jerked

convulsively as the remaining bullets thudded into his dead body.

Stan threw the pistols at him, then ran to Al. He knelt and cradled the outlaw's head in his arms. Aldrich's eyes fluttered and opened and he tried to smile at his pardner, but the effort produced only a gasp of pain.

A glance told Stan that the wound was fatal. But he smiled at Al. "I'll get a doctor up here and he'll have you good as new in no time."

"You were always a poor liar, buddy," Al said weakly. "I know I'm done for. It's just as well, I guess." A spasm of pain crossed his features and his voice dropped to a whisper. "I was getting awful sick of that life. The damn hiding! You were always hiding." A hideous grin twisted his features. "I don't have to hide no more." His head fell sideways and he was dead.

STAN CRIED, unashamed, like a baby. Al had never had a chance. He'd started down the owlhoot trail because he'd thought it was the smart thing to do, and when he'd learned how wrong he'd been, it was too late to turn back.

Long afterward, he found the horses and fastened the bodies of the outlaws across the saddles. Then he began the long ride back to Enfield. It was past midnight when he got back to the town. He left the bodies with the barber, who doubled as undertaker, and returned the money to the banker, whom he had to raise from bed.

That done, he went to the office. He noted with some surprise that the light was on. When he entered the doorway, he saw Adeline, sitting in a chair, waiting for him. He couldn't believe his eyes.

She rose and came slowly toward him. "You left last night without giving me a chance to think," she said hesitantly. "It was a shock to learn that you had served time in prison."

She got no encouragement from his face, it was expressionless. But bravely, she went on. "We talked it over, mother and daddy and I, and after we got used to the idea, we realized that it's what you are now and not what you were that matters. Mama and daddy have given their permission and if you still want me, I'll be proud to be your wife!"

Her last sentence drummed over and over again through his mind until he realized that she had actually said it. He reached for her and pulled her hungrily to him. *If you still want me?* He held her as though he would never let her go.

★

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by J. J. Mathews

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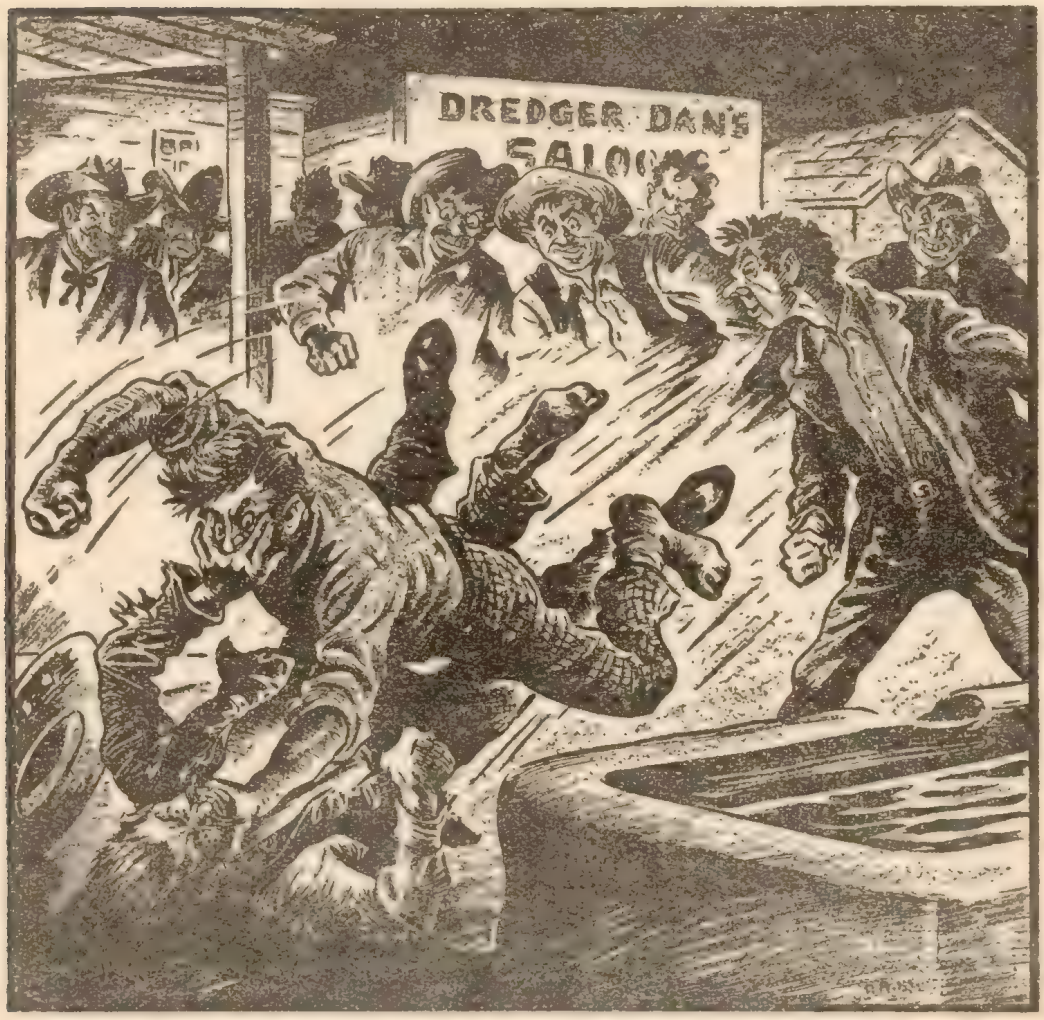
WESTERN ACTION

Gold Run was beseiged by Don Beria and his avengers, and the defenders' powder-supply had been used up in senseless practice-shooting. The town's one hope lay, as Digger John saw it, in old Ivy Joe's enormous collection of empty whisky-bottles . . .



DIGGER JOHN'S BOTTLES

by A. A. Baker

THE NIGHT was hot. A bright summer sun had glazed the Sierras with heat during the long days, until the trees were drooping and the underbrush crackled. The manzanita's green leaves browned and sharpened into crusty points. A few horses languished against the hitching post in front of Gold Run's main hotel and saloon. The windows of Dredger Dan's *Hotel and Saloon* were propped open with chunks of firewood letting the bar noises growl out onto the moonlit street.

Inside, seated well back in the corner next to the second story stairs Digger John eased off his big miner's boots, examined a hole in his stained

socks and listened to the row at the bar. Digger leaned back in his chair pressing his long arms against his stomach, and tried to relax. His general appearance was of a lump of tempered iron dressed in miner's clothing, topped by a mass of bushy black hair and contrasted with prickly red whiskers. Irritation spread across his heavy face as he listened.

"The Californiano was here, my family was here," the speaker let his words flow over the room. "The Beria cattle roamed, they built ranchos and lived at peace—until the Americanos came. Now, what is there?" Don Beria spread his brassy hands wide. "A brawling immigration of the gold seekers!"

Digger opened one eye, studied the Spaniard the way a hungry spider studies a fat fly, then eased his sweating back lower in the chair. Switching from the speaker, Digger watched a ragged old man move cautiously along the bar, reaching an aged hand toward an empty whiskey bottle. A half-smile parted the red whiskers; Digger hoped that Ivy Joe would get the bottle before the Spaniard or the fat saloon keeper could spot him.

Poison ivy scars etched Ivy Joe's old face. Scars flaked by constant itching of long nails produced the reddened welts that gave the elderly man his name. Ivy Joe was a bottle collector. He would steal, buy, or fight for any empty bottle that a Gold Run citizen might leave laying around. His shack, a dozen miles below town, stilted against Rock Ravine, was a mass of whiskey bottles, syrup jugs, wine casks, or any form of cylinder used in transporting liquid. His desire for bottles was as strong as the ordinary man's desire for gold, and often as dangerous to achieve.

"You—!" Digger snapped. "The Mexican hidalgo, with the Russian name, lay off the Americans!"

Ivy Joe attempted to use the interruption by snatching the bottle off the bar and tucking it under his ragged black coat. Don Beria turned his taut face toward Digger John, and his eyes caught Ivy Joe's action. He slapped the small bottle-collector across the face. Ivy Joe reeled, the bottle crashed and splintered on the floor. A few drops of whiskey were sucked up by the sawdust. "Son of a dog!" the Spaniard spat as Digger reared angrily from his chair.

"Nobody's callin' me a dog's puppy! 'Specially no lace-pantied Spaniard!"

BERIA realized that Digger was looking for trouble, but was unable to control his hate for all Americans. He accepted the challenge by ignoring the quavering bottle-stealer and addressed his remarks to the miner. "Opposition from *any* Americano is welcome." The thin, pointed nose snorted as he spat out. "What have *you* brought to California?"

"Just myself!" boomed Digger. "An' I don't want no argument about it. just want yew to stop slappin' little fellas around."

"That is my right," grated the Don. "And, my right to speech will *not* be questioned by a drunken American miner defending a thief!"

The room stilled. A family man lifted his coat from the back of his chair and eased toward the batwings. The aproned swamper toed a brass spittoon against the wall, throwing a worried glance at the freshly-washed windows. The faro dealer stacked coins in his money drawer and deftly turned the small key. A fly buzzed fitfully, and several men glared at the insect.

The Spaniard rubbed a yellow hand against the bone handle of a long knife tucked in the blue sash circling his thin waist. Digger rose from the chair; his shoulders seemed to widen as his big fists closed. His mouth thinned under a tight smile and he moved forward, in his anger forgetting to replace his boots.

"Now hold on!" It was a shout from the head of the stairs. Dredger Dan hefted a heavy shotgun in his pudgy arms. He let the wide muzzles move

restlessly over the assemblage. "No fightin' in my place! A man's got a right to his opinions; Beria's said what he thinks. Digger—if *yew* don't agree, then both of yew get outside. This place's been wrecked too many times an' I'm seein' it don't happen again!"

"Aw-right, Dredger," answered Digger, "we'll get outside. Beria..." he flipped the name with the distaste of a man washing a skunk, "yew want'a duel?"

"Most certainly!" snapped the Spaniard. "Choose what weapon you will. A Californiano's honor..."

"Aw, shut up!" howled Dredger. "Yew're the *talkin'est* pair I ever seen. Get out an' get on with the fight!"

"Just yew hold on, Dredger, the man's right. We'll duel, an' I'll..." a delighted look ran across the big miner's face..."I'll choose the weapons. Right, Beria?"

"Most certainly," repeated Don Beria. "*Any* weapons."

"Whiskey bottles!" hooted Digger John. "Quart whiskey bottles. First we drink the quart empty, then," he licked his lips, "then... No! We'll tie each man's left arm to the other, *then* we'll drink the whiskey. Onc't finished, we're ready to beat hell out of the other with the empty bottle. Sound all right?"

"It sounds stupid," snarled Beria, "but, if those are your weapons, and they suit you—I, Don Beria accept your conditions." The thin Spaniard stalked to the door. "We will meet at dawn?"

"Hell, no; right now. Dredger, dig out a couple of bottles."

A howl of excitement rose from the crowd and they scrambled toward the street. The mob gathered around the opponents outside. Their left arms were strapped with the reins from a vacant wagon. Two quart bottles were brought from the bar, the corks snapped out.

Dredger Dan mounted the water trough and shouted, "Yew all know the terms. First, the whiskey must be drank; then the bottle to be used as a weapon. Yew can poke with it, hit with it, or break same an' use the cuttin' edge. All settled?"

"Best idea I ever had," laughed Digger John. "Let her rip!"

"Stupid." Don Beria's face had whitened under the olive skin. "But. I am ready."

The hotel owner yelped, blasted both barrels of his shotgun into the hot night, and shouted. "Begin!"

THE RED liquor gurgled as the bottles were raised. Digger's bull neck became a funnel as he finished half of the bottle in the first gulp. Droplets of sweat rose on his broad forehead as he lowered the bottle.

Don Beria was having trouble, his windpipe bobbled and the whiskey ran over his lips and stained his white shirt. He choked, and suddenly spat a spray of whiskey full into Digger's laughing face. Digger braced his feet and glared around at the grinning crowd. He raised his bottle, and calmly drained it. With a deft flip, he reversed the empty bottle, the neck resting in his hand. He watched the Spaniard's frantic swallowing efforts and jiggled the bottle, as though trying to decide just where to strike the first blow.

The crowd saw Digger's eyes widen. He staggered, pulling the Spaniard off-balance; the up-ended bottle splashed red whiskey over both combatants but the miner was glaring down at his stockinged feet. He tapped the Don a backhanded blow with the bottle and growled. "Who stole my boots?"

The Don, a welt budding above his right eye, banged the stumbling barefooted miner across the bushy head. The crowd was yelling for blood. Dredger Dan toe-danced along the narrow rim of the water trough; one foot slipped into the water and he cursed. The white moon threw the shadows of the fighting men against the building walls.

Beria, struggling to focus his bleary eyes, straightened his tall body and stomped heavily on Digger's foot. Dig-

ger's socks had slipped loose, making his feet look as if they wore stocking caps. He became entangled and fell, pulling the fighting Spaniard down onto the dusty street. The bottles rolled under the milling feet of the crowd while the fighters flailed with their fists.

Suddenly, the full effect of the liquor took hold on the Spaniard. He seemed to swell, tried to climb to his feet, then expelled his breath in a vain attempt to suck in air; his face blackened, and he collapsed.

Digger John rose to his feet, dragged the unconscious man over to the water trough and heaved the limp body into the water. He watched the man start to float then shouted, "Cut me loose!"

A knife was handed forward and Dredger Dan severed the bonds and stepped back to watch Digger. The miner, staring straight ahead, walked a few steps, turned in a circle, staggered once, and fell head-on into the water trough. On the outskirts of the hooting crowd, Ivy Joe clutched the two emptied whiskey bottles and trotted toward Rock Ravine. The Gold Run citizens trooped back to the saloon leaving the duelists floating together in the sloppy water trough.

The fight brought to a head the bitterness between the Americans and the native Californians. Don Beria disappeared, but reports drifted through the mountains that he was gathering volunteers from among his own people. Surmising that he planned an attack on Gold Run, the local citizens organized The Blues, who drilled nightly on the wide street in front of the teamster's wagon lot. Seventy men volunteered, draped a blue sash around their middles, hoisted rifles to their red-shirted shoulders and stepped briskly over the graveled ground.

Digger John marched the first day, then gave up in complaint at the waste of powder, as The Blues blazed drumfire into the brush. "We'll get caught with empty powder-barrels," he warned. "We ain't in no war yet; save the powder till Beria attacks." His advice was ignored, so he spent his time lounging in a chair on the hotel porch.

DREDGER DAN'S saloon became headquarters for the little army. Great plans were worked out over his polished bar while he urged the thirsty powder-stained fighters to drink hearty, as he dug broad thumbs deep into the open gold pouches.

The threat from Beria became real when two miners were waylaid on the trail to the American River. Waylaid, robbed, stripped and pistol-whipped into the brush. Don Beria was ready, and the miners knew that open war, with the hordes of embittered Spaniards, would be vicious and complete. Murietta had once ranged these mountains, slashing the throats of his tortured victims. He, too, had sought revenge; Latin vengeance was deep-seated, grim, and always bloody.

Sentries were posted around the town; a lookout was stationed high on Cold Spring Mountain. The river miners shuffled into Gold Run, afraid to be caught alone on their desolate river claims. The population swelled, until whiskey soaked away and the beans and flour all but disappeared. Hunting parties scoured the mountains, but the deer had drifted higher into the cooler forests toward the Donner Summit. Only the fighting grizzlies stayed close, as though anxious to see the war. They fought on the ridges, roaring through the long nights while the besieged miners cursed their racket.

Reb Bellows, a teamster from Marysville, attempted to get through with a wagonload of gunpowder but was found murdered where the road widened at Branch Creek. The citizens knew they were encircled. Somewhere, out in the sweating mountains, Beria's army squatted in the trees, ready to strike.

"Only thing to do..." Digger John addressed the crowd huddled in Dredger's saloon..."is go out an' *find* Beria. We squat here—we starve—or get raided some night. We got to get

the roads open, so's the wagons can come in. An', first off, we got to have ammunition. In their shootin' practice. The Blues run down our stock of powder. Slugs, we got, an' can make outa the lead roof of Jensen's Store. but powder we're almost out of. We couldn't stand a seige—and Beria's smart enough to know that."

"How in blazes we goin' to get out?" snapped a miner. "How can we get out if nothin' can get in?"

"By locatin' Beria's army!" snorted Digger. "If we know where he is then we can figure somethin'. I'll take a couple men along with me an' we'll scout around."

"You have the right idea." It was the quiet-voiced gambler, Slim Deakins. "Count me in for one."

"An' me," hurriedly added Harry Jimpson. "I ain't exactly a friend of yours, Digger, but seein' we're all smeared up here, I'll go along."

"Never asked for friends!" barked Digger John. "Just someone who knows which end the slug comes outa the barrel. Yew'll do an', with Slim. we oughta find out somethin'."

"Yore danged bottle-duel done it!" rasped Harry Jimpson. "Yew see that Beria crazy. I 'spect," he added warily, "that if we'd turn yew over to him —for what he'd like to do—he might leave us be."

" 'Spect yore right;" laughed Digger. "But let's find him first; *then* yew can go in an' talk to him about doin' just that. Ain't guarenteein' that I'll ever let him get a'holt of me, but he might like *yew* for a substitute. We'll start..."

A CRASH of breaking bottles filled the room and all eyes turned to the back bar. Ivy Joe's scarred face peeked mournfully over the rim of the bar, then he spread his shaking hands helplessly as he stared down at the broken bottles. "Never meant no harm..."

"But yew've busted just about the last of the whiskey!" ranted Dredger. moving threateningly toward the little man. "Damn it, why'd yew get back there in the first place?"

"Jest for empties," quavered Ivy Joe.

"*Explain* that for me!" howled Dredger. "What's empty whiskey bottles got?"

"Jest like to have 'em, that's all." Ivy Joe brightened. "I've collected seven-thousand-and-nine whiskey bottles—quarts. Four-thousand-and-one-hundred whiskey bottles—pints..."

The man's enumeration of his prized possessions was cut off by a roar from the befuddled saloon-man. "Don't give a damn how many yew got, just don't break no more of *my* bottles! Now get the blue blazes out of there whilst I see if we can find a drink for these three scouts, that'll be lookin' for Beria's army." Dredger turned with an afterthought. "If yew'd do some minin' Ivy Joe, yew could *buy* all the bottles yew wanted..."

"I done that," Ivy Joe's voice trembled under Dredger's snapping words. "Two - thousand - and - four - ounces of..."

"Never *mind!*" yelled Dredger. "Get the hell outa my saloon!"

Digger John led his two scouts through the lower end of town. They dropped down into the cold water of Canyon Creek, crept along through the buckbrush, until the lights of Gold Run disappeared, then stopped for a conference.

"I figure they'll be riding horses," Digger John suggested. "Never knowed Spaniards to walk much. Now, the only place a troop of cavalry could drop on us, is through Rock Ravine. So..."

"They might use the wagon road." It was a ghostly voice coming from behind the three scouts. Startled, they whirled and faced the mopey figure of Ivy Joe.

"Where'd you come from?" Harry Jimpson's words were a frightened shout.

"Been folleyin' Digger," Ivy Joe muttered defensively. "Ain't none of

yore business, Harry Jimpson, long's Digger don't mind."

"S'all right," chuckled Digger. "Another man's always welcome, but they'll not use the wagon road, Ivy. The ridges can be manned by riflemen and could cut them down easy. They got to have some way, in some way like Rock Ravine that'll give 'em protection. We'll drift down toward that direction first."

"Brought a bottle," explained the little man. "Three—four drinks left; don't ever like to jest pour it out."

"Well, let's finish it then." Digger reached for the bottle. He gulped a long drink and passed it to Slim Deakins. Then Harry Jimpson downed the last drink and, ignoring Ivy Joe's reaching hand, heaved the empty high into the brush. Startled, Ivy Joe listened for the crash but the men heard the bottle catch in the brush, drop to the ground, then roll over a mass of rocks. It stopped rolling and Ivy Joe scrambled through the brush toward the sound of the rock slide.

"Yew knew he wanted that bottle," growled Digger. "Throwin' it up there was a damn' poor trick." His eyes glittered ominously. "A man brings us a drink—yew shouldn't mistreat him."

"He brought on the trouble with Beria in the first place!" was the belligerent retort. "Let's get on down the creek."

THE MOON was bright as the three men descended. Behind them, they could hear Ivy Joe scrambling around searching for the empty bottle. Suddenly, a horse snorted. The scouts ducked down and, for a long moment stared into the night. It was still, and they could hear the impatient movements of animals just below. A few muted voices drifted up the bank.

"Right below us..." whispered Digger. "Beria's comin' through Rock Ravine!"

"He's not started yet," opined Slim Deakins. "Maybe waiting for the moon to go down. That means he'll hit just before dawn?"

"That'll give us lots of time to get back," Harry Jimpson put in. "We can line up the rifle men to give them a welcome..."

"Yeah, an'..." began Digger John when the night seemed blown apart by the roaring clatter of falling rocks. They heard Ivy Joe shout, "Look out below!" Then an avalanche of bouncing boulders descended with the racket of an explosion. The rocks slashed into trees, hopped over the brush, and drummed their way into the Spaniard's camp below. The horses milled against the rope corral and squeals of fright were joined by surprised Spanish curses. A wild-eyed roan broke loose and charged up the ravine into the trio of prone Americans. Digger John rolled under the protection of the rocky bank and heard his two partners shout and run down the ravine.

A blast of gunfire out of the Spanish camp. Angry voices told the hidden man that his companions had been taken. Dead, or alive, he couldn't be sure.

As the last of the rocks broke through the brush, Digger knew that he and the defenders of Gold Run, were in a tight spot. Beria's army apparently outnumbered the defenders. They were ready to raid and, now that they realized their camp was discovered. Beria's Spaniards would hurry their attack. It would take Digger hours to retrace his way to Gold Run, and they would give the Spaniards plenty of time to race through Rock Ravine and slaughter the unprepared, powderless Blues.

Undecided, Digger John inched his big form out from the protection of the rocks and began crawling through the brush lined creek. "Digger?" The voice of Ivy Joe whispered from the top of the bank.

"Down here," answered the miner. He waited until Ivy Joe's thin figure dropped down beside him. The little man clutched the empty whiskey bottle. "I found it," he stated and gazed reverently at the red bottle, the moon

glinting against its shiny surface. "Label ain't even been torn."

"An' the Spaniards found us," Digger said drily. "Did yew have to go lookin' for it tonight?"

"Oh, I never thought of that," groaned Ivy Joe. "Guess it'd been better if I'd waited till later, huh?"

"It'd been better for Slim and Jimpson, an' better for Gold Run. But what's done has gotta be corrected now." Softly, Digger explained the impossibility of beating the attackers into Gold Run.

"A couple of men," Ivy Joe stated bravely, "might hold 'em down at Rock Ravine. I got a half keg of powder, an' some lead, at my cabin. We could make a stand there, till The Blues can get down an' help us."

"Sure, but what'll *they* fight with..." Digger asked sourly..."bottles?"

AT THE word "bottles", Ivy Joe's face froze. Digger's eyelids dropped as an idea hit him. He kept his eyes half closed, as though to prevent Ivy Joe's seeing what he was thinking. "Let's try her," Digger spoke slowly. "We'll get on down to Rock Ravine ahead of Beria an' see what we can cook up." Without waiting for an answer, Digger began climbing the opposite bank. With concern on his scarred face, Ivy Joe followed his crouching figure.

They reached the worn trail and Digger John laid his big hand on Ivy Joe's shoulder. "Now, listen. Yew got to head up toward Gold Run. Tell The Blues that I'm tryin' to hold off Beria, down at yore cabin. Tell them to get on down there, to bring all the hand fightin' weapons they can find. Scythes swords, butcher knives, even double-bitted axes; we got dam' little powder, but if we can get them off their horses—an' into a standup gang fight —we got a chance."

"But what'll yew do, Dig?" Concern rumpled Ivy Joe's face but a threading of slyness ran under his words.

"I'll just keep firin' till yew get them Blues down there. Why?"

"My bottles—yew'll look out for my bottles?"

"I'll do everythin' I can to save yore bottles," chortled Digger. "Now get along, or yew won't be alive to count—or collect—any more bottles."

"I—didn't like the way you said 'bottles' back there." The little man was still reluctant. "There ain't nothin' in yore figurin' about them bottles, Dig?"

"Naw, Ivy. Now get on up that trail." He watched the forlorn small figure trudge toward Gold Run, then hurried his steps down toward Rock Ravine.

Rock Ravine was a narrow pass, cut by the whipping white water of Cold Ravine Creek. The splashing water had torn into the corroded granite until the narrow road dropped two hundred feet into the spuming wake, then climbed another hundred feet up the steep bank to come out of the cut between narrow walls that reached into the dark night. Ivy Joe's cabin squatted on the ledge, just off the narrow road. Stacked neatly, on all sides of the cabin, thousands of bottles glinted in the waning moon. Ivy Joe had covered several of the stacks with canvas, while others were protected by weather stained quilts.

Digger squatted through the littered cabin until he uncovered the half-filled keg of gunpowder. He searched further and located a tin box of bright lead slugs. Swiftly, he dragged the keg a hundred feet back up the ravine, placed it behind a half-buried boulder, then returned and attacked the stacks of bottles.

The night hours passed and Digger's red shirt was sweat-stained from his hundreds of trips down into the crossing. He straightened and listened. Far below, he caught the sound of many horses. The creak of saddles and the ominous clink of rifle against the jutting rocks. Don Beria had wasted no time, he was bringing his army on. Soon they would reach the narrow defile,

pass through, and Gold Run would be defenseless against their overwhelming number.

Digger threaded his way around his rows of standing bottles. Stretched for a hundred yards, the prize collection of Ivy Joe was standing along the trail. Some bottles were jammed into the gravelly ground by their stubby necks; other bottles sat firmly on their bottoms. Some were laid flat. Digger had used this hour of grace to lay the thousands of cylinders full on the trail. Beria's army would first have to traverse a blockade of whiskey bottles. The shod hoofs of the horses would crush into the glass. Some would break but Digger John knew that many would roll under the skittish hoofs of the high spirited California horses.

Digger flexed his broad back stretched his thick arms, picked up his muzzle-loading gun and dropped behind a rock. Without aiming, he fired the first shot in battle. The moon dropped down as the sky began to whiten in the east. He wondered how long it would take Ivy Joe to bring help, then a grin spread over his sweat-studded whiskers as he realized that Ivy Joe would really hurry help back down the trail. Help that might save his precious collection.

BELOW the ravine, Digger could hear the shouted commands that halted the advance of Beria's army. The blast from his gun had startled them and they needed time to figure out what the gun shot meant. Digger could guess Don Beria's thoughts. Had their movements been detected? Were the defenders of Gold Run lined up in the narrow pass, ready to drum fire them off their horses? Digger knew they would send a few men forward, to look over the gateway, before risking their force into an ambush.

By the sounds errupting from the enemy, Digger guessed that they were several hundred strong; outnumbering the powderless Blues two to one. He hunkered down and waited for the first sombrero to stick out into the Ravine; he felt like a man in a huge nutcracker. The only thing that gave him a chance was the bottles that lay on the ground; weak glass blown to hold whiskey, plus a single gun, didn't add up to much in trying to hold off several hundred bloodthirsty Spaniards.

The scouts advanced. A head jumped nervously over a rock, black eyes studied the narrow defile and Digger blasted a shot at the man. The head was withdrawn, and a puzzled chatter of Spanish errupted. Minutes passed in silence as the men returned to Don Beria and told of the strange barricade. Then a shouted laugh echoed to Digger John and clashing hoofs notified him that Don Beria thought very little of the problem. He had decided to ride his army right through the bottles, knowing his time for surprise was running out.

They came in a rush. The trail held horses three abreast. They lunged down the slope, entered the white water and broke over the lip in front of Ivy Joe's cabin. The first horses went into the bottles in a thundering charge. Digger fired and the first man over, dropped out of the saddle. The riderless animal slipped on a rolling quart and staggered against a heavy bay. Both animals went down. Digger had reloaded and blasted into the melee. Beria's army slowed. The horsemen backing up into the water-swept cut. Those behind, still thundered over the far lip and crashed into the crowded defile. The lead horsemen urged their rearing horses up the trail and among the bottles. Other horses went down flailing amid the glass and men were thrown, to jump to their feet and clash over the bottle littered ground.

Desperately, Digger's rifle blared, picking off the closest men. Some of the bottles broke under the rush of Beria's army. The leaders might be down, but each moment the army was advancing a few yards across the flat space that ended at Digger's rock. With grimy, powder-stained hands, he scooped his horn full of powder.

banged the wooden plug into the barrel, and heaved it out into the melee of Don Beria's still oncoming army.

The barrel rolled crazily downward but was diverted by the bottles and bounded off to rest under the west wall of the cut. Hurriedly, Digger blasted a shot into the barrel. The slug clashed off its rim and the barrel whirled, but didn't explode.

With studied calm, Digger dribbled powder into the muzzle, jammed a wad of paper down the gun's throat, spit a slug into the barrel, tapped the stock on the ground and upended the gun. He held his fire until the barrel was in full sight under the flailing hoofs, then fired. The barrel exploded. The west wall came down and the dust rose in the dawning sky. Animals squealed, Spaniards' curses bellowed over the crash of rocks.

Above the sound of the explosion, Digger John heard the wild yells of The Blues. Gold Run's powderless army had arrived. The glint of blades caught in the rising sun. They went into the melee in a yelling body, toe dancing through the broken glass and hammering viciously at the demoralized Spaniards.

In a few short minutes the fight was over. Spaniards whirled their remaining horses and charged back down the Ravine. Prisoners were gathered up and roped together. A search party backtracked to the Spaniards' camp and located Slim Deakins and Harry Jimpson, battered but unhurt, still tied to a stand of thick manzanita.

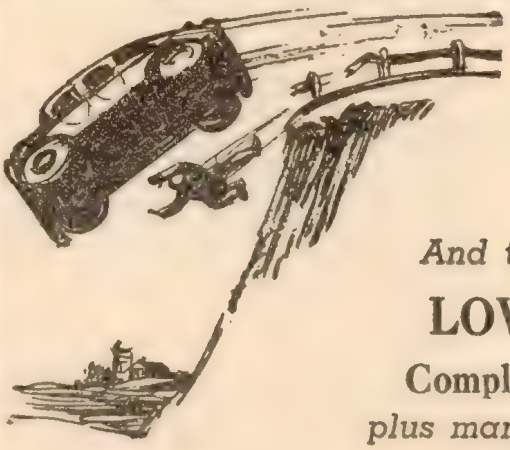
Don Beria led the retreat and escaped, but his army was destroyed; and the Gold Run citizens knew he'd never recover from his defeat at the battle of the bottles.

DIGGER JOHN eased into a chair at the back of Dredger's saloon. A whiskey bottle rested on the floor leaving a wet spot in the sawdust. His powder-stained trigger hand rolled the wet glass between his fingers as he beckoned Dredger Dan's new bartender. "Ivy Joe, here's another empty bottle; bring me a full one."

A smile of pleasure spread over Ivy Joe's scarred face as he nodded, then ducked his head under Dredger Dan's glaring look from the stairs.

"I never seen such a bartender!" Dredger growled from deep in his throat. "Sells more likker'n anybody I ever had but—pours the biggest drinks in the gold fields. He just can't wait to get them bottles empty!"

★



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Andy Nelson figured that maybe he'd made a mistake, agreeing to let this banker appear to beat him up in a fight, regardless of the cash. But it was too late to back out now, and Andy was wondering if there wasn't something else buried in the deal, too . . .

GUNDOWN FOR A SADDLEBUM

by W. J. Reynolds

IT WAS Joe Innis' town, and most times the heavy man rode that fact for all it was worth. He was now, using his authority of self-appointed marshal, picking on a broke and hungry cowboy a long way from home.

"You hear me, saddlebum?" Innis said, his bluish eyes mean as he sighted down his long nose at Andy Nelson. "We don't care for bums in this town. Get back to Texas with the other bums!"

Andy clamped his jaws tightly. He'd heard about Innis since hitting this part of Montana. He owned a lot of this town of Trent, and he liked to back a man in a corner and use the spurs, like now. Innis had had ambitions to be a town tamer but lacked the cold nerve. He hated Texas men because a hardcase Texan had run him out of Hays City and ruined his town taming ambitions.

"You hear me, saddlebum?" Innis snarled. "Get out of town!"

He wheeled away, and Andy was painfully aware of the faces in the doors and windows, and on the porch of Innis' saloon. Andy hunched his cold ears down in the collar of his mackinaw and his clenched fists made two sharp bulges in the pockets.

He glared after Innis and barely bit off the yell that rose in his throat. Not all of Andy's usual humor was frozen by the Montana cold, but he managed to bite off the impulsive yell. Innis was tight as a fiddle string, even knowing that Andy didn't have a gun. The damn fool would likely shoot...

"Yeeeooow!" Andy bellowed.

Innis' reaction was all that Andy could have hoped for. He leaped into the air with a yell, tried to whirl and draw his gun at the same time. His boots tangled and he fell heavily, his breath leaving him in a great whoosh, and his gun went skittering away on the hard packed snow of the street.

Andy stood stock still and for a long moment there was a complete silence, broken only by Innis' gasping. The marshal's face was contorted by the effort to regain his breath, and his bluish eyes walled wildly.

A wide grin split Andy's freckled

face, and with his grin the watchers burst into a great guffaw that must have peeled Innis' hide. There was plain murder in Innis' snarling face as he scrambled to his knees, then lunged for the gun, incoherent curses spilling from his lips. There was no doubt of his intention, he aimed to shoot Andy Nelson to doll rags. The stillness settled instantly on the town again.

Andy bunched his muscles for his desperate lunge at the marshal, but jerked up again as a horse and rider lunged up between them, and a lithe rider swung down to face Innis. A small boot was planted firmly on Innis' gun. A girl!

"All right, Innis," she said, hard and sharp. "You had your fun and your bullying. He had his yell coming. Take your bullying back to your saloon, maybe it'll be appreciated more there."

Innis glared at her and came to his feet. "Don't interfere with the law, Hedy Bain. You'll be sorry. I aim to gutshoot—"

"Law!" she snapped. "I can pin on a badge and be the same amount of law that you are. Don't push your luck too hard. Do you doubt that I can start yelling and have a bullet put into you before the day is out?"

The murderous look on his face with his silent glare told Andy that he didn't doubt it. Andy had his own ideas about that too. This redhead could start yelling around and have Innis skinned alive and stuffed! Andy would help.

She removed her boot from the gun

and he retrieved it, shoved it back in his holster, and with a silent glare for both of them, wheeled and strode furiously to a side door of the saloon and disappeared.

SHE TURNED to face Andy, and he felt his adam's apple jumping up and down. His ears burned a bright red. She wasn't big, even with the sheepskin coat, but it was obvious that nature had worked lovingly over her. She wore no hat and short, rebellious curls made a patch of color inside the turned up collar of the coat. Eyes blue and sparkling now, regarded Andy steadily.

"Cowboy," she said, "you ought to do something about those impulses!"

Andy found his tongue with difficulty. "Old pistol nose nearly done something about it," he said. "I never was noted for having any sense, if I did have any, I'd be in Texas instead of freezing here. I thank you, ma'am."

She laughed, or more correctly, giggled. "You sure done a good job on Innis." She sobered. "Don't think he'll let it stop there. He'll beat you to death or shoot you the first chance now. Don't forget that for a minute. Maybe you'd better leave town."

"Ain't nothing I'd like better...or did like better...before now..." His ears flamed a bright red again.

She grinned at him, but her cheeks colored a little too. "You're the cowboy that came up with the Patterson herd, aren't you? Are you the one that stayed to go mining? That lost your outfit in the mountains?"

He nodded. "Lost the whole caboodle, horse, saddle, gear, money—and gun. Went over a cliff in a snow slide. I ain't a mountain man I reckon."

She nodded agreement. "Takes experience."

His grin was rueful. "I had the gun and money cached in my roll, didn't want to get in trouble, or spend the money I'd need to get back home. Another one of them impulses!" His face tightened. "My partner that wanted me to help work his mine was dead a week when I got there. Timber fell on him."

There was sympathy in her eyes. She smiled, warm, friendly. "Well, if you don't run into anything, come out to the Bar B, eight miles south. You can stay there until you get straightened out."

"Thank you, ma'am, that's mighty—"

"Hedy! Hedy, come here, please!"

Both looked toward the small brick bank up the street and to the big man there in the doorway. Even at this distance, Andy could see the petulant displeasure on his smooth face. He saw the temper run in Hedy's face for a moment before she said, "All right, Arty." She looked at Andy. "Luck, cowboy." She walked toward the bank, leading her horse, a small, lithe figure with her bright hair making a warm spot in the cold street.

Andy turned back to the walk behind him and hunkered against a store building out of the chilling wind. The girl was right, he'd have to think of some way to get out of this town. Innis would have him locked up the first chance, and pistol whip him near to death in the bargain, if he didn't shoot him. It was a hell of a long ways to Texas for a man on foot and broke too.

He thought of the Bar B and the warmth came to him again only to be dispelled quickly. It would be no better than charity to a down-on-his-luck cowboy. A heck of a note, the prettiest girl he'd seen in a month of Sundays and to be near her, he'd have to scrounge off her! Blame it anyhow, he'd slap freeze first!

Andy glanced, scowling, at the bank. He saw Hedy flounce out of the door and the big gent with the soft, smooth face stand in the door, anger in his face now. He said something low and hard after the girl.

Hedy whirled, face flushed with anger. "You haven't got the guts to whip anything more than a thick steak! Much less a tough cowhand, even if

he has missed a few meals!" She whipped a glance at Andy.

Andy's heart skipped a beat. She was talking about him! Doughbelly had evidently threatened to whip him! Because she'd taken his part, maybe. Jealous. Andy remembered then of hearing talk about the prettiest girl in the state being engaged to a bank cashier. This Arty character was him. Andy watched them from under the tipped brim of his hat.

The banker said something else and Hedy leaped onto her horse and kicked it into a lope to vanish behind the bank, going toward the livery. The banker stood scowling in the doorway then he looked in Andy's direction, face sullen.

ANDY'S ATTENTION sharpened suddenly as the banker's face brightened and became crafty. He turned back into the bank and appeared again in a minute. He watched Andy steadily, and let several coins cascade from one hand to the other, the rich jingle of the gold came faintly to Andy's ears. Andy raised his head and looked directly at the banker. The banker jerked his head almost imperceptibly, and turned back inside.

"Now what is that character up to?" Andy muttered. He got up and moved up the street toward the little brick building, and went in. The smooth faced Arty was alone, but behind the cage now. "You wanted me?" Andy asked.

"Yes. My name's Arty Wyatt. Cashier here. I hear you're broke and need a stake to get out of here, back to Texas. That right?"

"You won't ever be more right." Andy said.

"Look," Wyatt said bluntly, "we won't go into our feelings for each other, or what I think of my fiancee making a scene in the street over a penniless cowhand, and interfering with the law—"

"Maybe we'd better not go into that," Andy said.

Wyatt went on, "You need a stake, I need something else, and I'm willing to pay you a hundred dollars in gold to do it." He let the gold coins, five double eagles, fall in a scalloped line on the marble counter.

Andy stared at the coins, brand spanking new gold pieces. There lay wheels under him all the way to Texas, and grub in his belly too. "Who do you want murdered?" Andy said.

Wyatt chuckled richly, and with relief. "You'll do it then? No killing. It's real easy, but I want it bad enough to pay for it. You just go to the saloon, Innis' saloon, and let me come in, then pick a fight with me. Let me knock you out, or pretend you're knocked out. That's all!"

Andy stared at Wyatt. "Then Innis beats the hell out of me with his gun and throws me in jail, huh?"

"No," Wyatt said hastily. "I have some influence here; I'll see you're free, and with no beating. Is it a deal?"

"It sure is," Andy said. "Gimme." He held out his hand.

Wyatt's face was suddenly cold. "There's one condition. You don't show this money in this town. Not at all. I'll get you a ride out tomorrow on a freighter. In the next town you can get a ticket for home or anything else you want. Clear?"

"All right," Andy said.

Wyatt shoved him the gold pieces, and then shoved out two silver dollars. "Take the silver and get something to eat and then go nurse the rest until I get to the saloon, about four-thirty, after I close." He glanced at the wall clock. "Another hour."

Andy pocketed the money and left. He moved slowly down the street, the weight of the gold a solidness in his pocket. But he didn't feel elated. He felt bad. It was a hell of a way to make money, and a lot of folks wouldn't think much of it. Andy thought of a pair of blue eyes going cold and contemptuous, and he squirmed inwardly. Then his ears burned hotly as he saw Hedy Bain leaning against a store front watching him. Damn it anyhow, she'd seen him come out of the bank...

ANDY BOLTED into a restaurant. He hardly tasted the steak and eggs despite his ravenous hunger, thinking of Hedy and that steady regard. He finished his meal and eased out of the restaurant, glance darting guiltily, but the girl wasn't in sight. Andy hurried on to the Innis saloon.

There was a fair crowd of townsmen, cowboys and miners scattered about the tables and at the bar. Andy bellied up to the bar, and said, "Whiskey." He rang the remaining silver dollar on the bar and the bartender lost his cold look, and shoved out a bottle and glass.

Andy drank off the whiskey, poured another and nursed it, sipping. It was half gone when Arty Wyatt came into the barroom and stopped next to Andy. He ordered a whiskey and was lifting it when Andy said, "I hope it chokes you."

Wyatt stiffened and looked at Andy down his nose. "I beg your pardon!"

"You heard me, dough head," Andy said.

"Now look here, you...you saddlebum!" Wyatt shouted. "You know who you're talking to?"

"A fathead," Andy said. "A fathead who'll steal pennies from pore widow women and young'uns. I ought to knock your ears down!"

"Why, you—" Wyatt swung a roundhouse at Andy's head.

Andy ducked and sank a freckled fist in Wyatt's belly. The banker doubled over with a grunt, and his back end hit the bar and showed him forward into Andy's sizzling right to his nose. The blood spurted and Wyatt yelled furiously. Andy felt Wyatt's panic. Damn the fellow anyhow. No wonder he had to hire people to let him whip them! He'd be running in a minute and take the hundred back...

Andy saw Wyatt's furiously swung punch, lunged instinctively, but slowed enough to take part of the blow on his chin and neck. It was enough to heel Andy backward, and when Wyatt leaped in, rage reddening his face, Andy took another punch on his chin and flopped back on the floor. He saw Wyatt draw back a foot, the rage driving him, and Andy rolled partly to his feet. Wyatt set his foot down and hit Andy again, and Andy went down with a sighing moan.

"I'll be damned," an amazed voice said. "Arty, I didn't think you had it in you!"

"That Texas feller is catching it today," another said. "You sure put him down, Arty!"

Andy hoped nobody would notice his face getting red. Then suddenly his face really flamed as he saw a redhead poke inside the doors and a pair of blue eyes regarded him in astonishment. Andy groaned and sat up.

The bartender came around the bar and hauled Andy to his feet. Andy said thickly, "What happened?"

"Get out," the bartender said. "Take your damn trouble making somewhere else. Git! I'll bend this bung starter over your thick head!"

Innis came bulling through the crowd from a rear room, his gun in his hand, and a nasty grin on his face. He shoved the gun under Andy's nose. "This time, saddlebum, you're in for it. You're going to jail, and me and you will have us some fun! Git!"

Wyatt moved over beside Innis, and the alert Andy saw Wyatt's furtive nudge. "Oh, let him go, Innis," Wyatt said. "A night in the cold will be more sobering than a night in jail. Just see he's run out tomorrow sometime." His eye drooped in an almost imperceptible wink at Innis.

Innis cursed but after a moment he snarled, "Git! And hear this, feller, you vacate this town tomorrow morning or you'll get your damn head beat off."

ANDY WALKED out of the saloon, his ears burning with the remarks that no one bothered to tone down. Remarks concerning the color of his guts, his fighting ability and trouble making capacity.

He walked toward the livery down the darkening street. Maybe he could

get a sleeping spot in the loft again, and tomorrow he'd grab the first vehicle that left this damn town...

"Well, battler," a sharp voice said. "What was all that about?" Hedy stepped away from a darkened store to confront him.

"Uh," Andy said, "I sorta slipped—"

"How much did Arty pay you to let him whip you?"

"Uh," Andy repeated, his ear burning. "Pay me? Why, I just sorta got my dander up, and—"

"Bah," she said.

Andy shuffled uneasily. This blame girl was too smart for a plain cowpoke. "I reckon I'd better get down to the livery—"

"I saw you go in the bank," she said blocking his path. "What did Arty try to prove with his battling? Everybody knows he can't fight his way out of a wet paper bag!"

"I just went in there to try and raise a couple dollars on my silver belt buckle—"

"You're lying!"

"Now look here!" Andy hollered.

"Answer my question, what did he want?"

He wasn't getting anywhere like this. He looked down at the wide eyes and soft mouth, and was inspired. He drew himself up and scowled down at her. "Look here, young'un, you want I should grab you and kiss you plumb solid and complete?"

She stiffened and her eyes narrowed a trifle before they popped wide again and she stepped against him. "Yes, Andy. Kiss me. Good!" She puckered up her lips.

Andy gulped and backed hastily way.

She came against him again, grabbing his arms this time, and stretched upward to kiss him full on the lips. Andy kissed her back before he had time to think of it, and the Montana cold suddenly became tropical. He stood weak kneed as she backed away, quickly, and her eyes were very wide.

"Threaten me some more," she said.

Andy was too dazed to note the faint quaver in her voice. He suddenly lunged-around her and lumbered away toward the livery, his mind seething with the thought of warm lips and soft blue eyes. Tomorrow he was heading for Texas, and fast.

ANDY WOKE with a start as the floor of the barn loft seemed to toss him in the air then hit him in the back. He fought the blankets wildly, thrashing in the hay, and finally cleared them to come to his knees beside the loft window. Outside the moon shone brightly, and with the snow, it was almost light as day. A pall of smoke was drifting from the bank's shattered windows.

A man's voice lifted, "The bank! The bank's been robbed!" Other voices took up the cry and Andy saw men leaving homes and the saloon, running for the bank. Andy ran for the ladder and spilled down it.

The liveryman man was leaving the office, a buffalo coat over red flannels. He ran for the bank with Andy close behind him.

Then suddenly, Andy's steps slowed and stopped. A tingle of warning was running in him, a foreboding that all was not well. Andy had lived enough alone and on the ranges to heed his hunches. Hedy had thought that Wyatt was up to something, and he had paid a hell of a lot for knocking a man down. It had served no purpose that Andy could see and he hadn't examined it, thinking mostly of the brightly new gold. He was supposed to be broke and no one knew he had this money and if Innis found it on him, and he'd be the first man the marshal would grab... Andy brought out the gold and shoved it in a drift of snow at the corner of the livery corral and kicked snow over it. Then he ran on toward the bank.

He came abruptly face to face with Wyatt. The cashier leaped on Andy, the suddenness and the weight bearing Andy to the snow. "Innis!" Wyatt

yelled. "Innis, here he is! Grab him somebody!"

Andy whipped a fist into Wyatt's face, and the banker's bawl of pain was music to his ears. He was starting another punch when he saw Innis race up, his gun barrel swinging.

Andy dodged but not quick enough and his head burst into a mass of light and bursting stars.

He came to in the saloon, sitting in a chair with two men holding him upright. The contents of his pockets lay scattered on the table. "He ain't got the money!" Innis snarled. "He's already ditched it someplace!"

Wyatt shifted nervously behind Innis, both of them tried to conceal an uneasiness. Another voice said, an old and weary voice, "The liveryman said he could have left the loft and come back without him knowing it. Said he was dressed when he come down. The money can't be far, most of it was gold, newly minted gold that hadn't been issued yet. We'd just got it on the morning stage."

Andy saw that he was old, and looked sick and had his left foot heavily bandaged. Gout, maybe. Innis said, "How much you figure, Mr. Colter?"

"Must have been twenty thousand," the old man said. "Right, Arty?"

Wyatt nodded. "I'd say about that."

Colter, Andy thought, that was the banker, the owner. Colter said, "Well, Innis, lock him up, and send for the sheriff. Maybe you'd better post a guard in the bank too. Law might find something to go on."

"I can handle it," Innis growled. "Ain't nothing to solve now. He stole the dynamite from Yewel's store and blowed the safe. Arty said he was in today sizing up the place." Innis hefted his gun with a savage grin. "He'll confess before morning and tell us where the gold is."

Colter's voice was hard. "There'll be none of that, Innis. The sheriff is paid to handle things like this. He was caught too quickly. He'll talk and we'll get the money back. Legally. Remember it." His gaze locked with Innis'.

"I'm the law here!" Innis snarled.

"Self appointed," Colter said. "You have no more authority than I have. It was my money and my bank. You'll do as I say!"

"Hell with you then," Innis shouted. "I won't have nothing more to do with it! Guard him yourself!" He whirled and stamped away.

"Arty," Colter said, "see that he's locked in that cell and have a man guard him. Get Slim, he'll do it for a dollar."

A HALF HOUR later, Andy was in the single cell, and Slim, the saloon swamper, was grumblingly kindling a fire in the rusty stove. The calaboose was a single long leanto on a store, with the back part partitioned off and lined with two by six inch boards. There was a door of the same with a cross hatch of wagon tires for a two foot square opening.

Andy hunched his shoulders and sat with his back against the wall. He was cold and his head hurt like forty where Innis had hit him. He was in a hell of a jackpot. Maybe the sheriff would have more sense...

Slim's whiskered and bleary eyed face appeared in the opening. He shoved a bottle through a square. "Have a drink, feller, long time till morning."

Andy drank from the full bottle. "Thanks, Slim."

The cell warmed a little with the roaring fire in the other end, and Andy slept a little, fitfully, and then became cold again. Finally, he got to his feet. Maybe he could wheedle Slim into jacking up that fire... He saw the hopelessness of that at once. Slim was wrapped in a buffalo coat, snoring loudly, and the empty whiskey bottle lay beside him. Slim wasn't about to be awakened.

Andy paced the short cell, trying to warm his blood a little, and wasn't aware that he had company until Hedy spoke from the barred square, "How's the bank robbing career coming, Andy?"

"Not good," Andy said. "It was mighty short. Only thing is I was asleep. But I can't prove it."

"Andy, have you got any ideas about that bank robbing?"

"I got some, but they're not likely to help me. No proof, and I'm a stranger."

"How much did Arty pay you, Andy?" she asked softly. "And why didn't he say he'd paid you instead of saying you'd cased the bank? Why didn't Innis beat your head half off in the saloon after the fight? He could have, and he would have too, if he didn't have a better reason. A lot of whys."

Andy stared at her, straining his eyes in the faint light that filtered in through the dirty window. He said, "Wyatt paid me a hundred to let him knock me out. New minted gold. I had to keep it out of sight till tomorrow. I shoved it in the snow at the corner of the corral."

"That's better," she said. She sighed then went on, "Andy, Arty has been gambling too heavily, and Colter would have caught him snitching money if he hadn't been laid up with the gout."

"And he had to cover the loss." Andy said. "Innis had him over a barrel too. I.O.U.'s likely."

"Right," she said. "He had his eye on the Bar B, but I fixed that today when I broke our engagement. You just came in handy for a fall guy, else he'd have cleared out with the bank money. There's another thing, I couldn't sleep, and saw a man leave the bank in a hurry and go to Innis' saloon. The bank blew a couple of minutes later!"

Hope flamed in Andy. "Hedy, are you sure? Then that money is in the saloon! If I could get there, I could grab the robbers and the money!"

"That's what I figured!" she said. "I stole a crowbar for a key!" She worked quickly with the bar, and when she had it jammed in the lock, Andy ran his arms through the iron squares to add his strength. The lock snapped and she swung the door open. She extended a sixshooter to him. "Here, it's loaded all around!"

He shoved the gun in his pocket and grabbed her and kissed her quickly. "Honey," he said huskily, "I'm going to have to make me a stake quick, so I can make a special trip to Montana to ask you to marry me!"

She started to speak, but bit off the words and held out her hand. "Here's more shells for the gun."

He took them and dropped them in his pocket. "Hey, you run for Colter and whoever else he wants to bring and get them down here. I'll grab those two slickers. It looks like there's still a game going, and they'll wait till it breaks to divide the loot."

"I'll go with you," she said.

"I'm a stranger, Hedy, if I did get the loot, they could beller that I'd hid it there. I'll just try to hold them till you get back, and Colter can open the safe or whatever kind of strong box Innis has. Please, Hedy."

She agreed reluctantly, then added, "Don't be a hero, Andy Nelson. Wait for us." She trotted away in the moonlight. Andy ran lightly toward the saloon.

HE BARELY made the side porch when the sound of boots warned him and he hit the ground and rolled under the porch as the door opened and men trooped onto the small porch. Their curses and muttering told him the game had broken up with Innis heavy winner. They moved away, and Andy waited a couple of minutes and was wiggling from under the porch when more boots stopped him. Two men this time.

Innis said, "It won't hold up, Wyatt. That damn saddlebum will go free, and that sheriff will nose around and maybe find something. We got to."

"I don't like it," Wyatt muttered. "Murder will get us hung."

"Hell, we can beat that easy. He's a suspected bank robber. We'll bust the lock and shoot him escaping, and I'll plant this derringer on him, we'd

missed it searching him. No trouble there. Everybody will be convinced that he's guilty. We'll be safe and twenty thousand richer!"

"I still don't like it..."

"Damn it, shut up, I'll kill him and enjoy it, I owe him a bullet anyhow!" They stepped off the porch and moved toward the calaboose.

With his chin in the snow, Andy stared after them, his jaw tight with the anger that coursed through him. The murdering... Kill Andy Nelson to cinch their loot, huh? Andy crawled from under the porch, the gun gripped in his fist. He saw them enter the calaboose and he ran hard then, toward them.

He was halfway but still thirty yards away when they came boiling through the door again. They saw him instantly in the bright moonlight.

"Kill him! There he is!" Wyatt yelled.

Andy lunged for the ground and they both fired. They fired again, and Andy felt the rip of a slug as it dug the snow under him. He fired, and Wyatt yelled and leaped around the corner of the building. Andy thumbed off a second shot at Innis, his gun's blast coming with Innis'. Innis lunged back into the calaboose as Wyatt fired from the corner.

Andy shot at Wyatt then and saw the man lurch out into plain view, then start to jump back to safety. Andy shot him and saw Wyatt go down even as he heard the meaty smack of the striking bullet. Andy was on his feet running when Innis' gun roared from the doorway.

Andy's left leg gave way and he sprawled on his face as Innis' next bullet ripped through his coat. Andy fired once and heard Innis curse. Knowing he had only one more shot, Andy started punching the shells from his gun and shoved in new loads.

He started crawling the remaining twenty yards as he heard shouts from the edge of town, and Hedy's high cry. Innis poked his gun through the window glass and fired. Andy put two bullets through the window and made the porch in a final lunge.

INSIDE, a gun burst into a shattering roar and bullets whipped into the porch, splintering the wood, and ripping through the slack of Andy's coat as he hugged the ground at the porch's edge. He heard the click of the hammer then and came to his feet and went inside in a lunging dive.

A gun bellowed, hard and sharp, and Andy felt his right arm go limp, the weight of the gun too much for it. Even as he scooped the gun up with his left hand, he thought, that damn derringer that Innis had mentioned... The sixshooter bucked in Andy's hand, and there in the corner the derringer flashed and roared its second shot. Then Andy was sitting there near the muttering Slim, and staring at Innis' limp form yonder in the corner.

Slim struggled to his knees. "Whash hell goin' on, huh?" He slowly sank back and started snoring again.

A half a dozen men burst into the room, two of them supporting Colter. Hedy rushed to kneel beside Andy. "Andy! Are you hurt bad?"

Andy grinned. His head hurt, and felt sort of flighty but there was a mighty good feeling inside him. Hedy's warm hands prying at him, helped the feeling get better.

"Not much, I reckon," he said. He looked at Colter. "If you'll send somebody to the saloon, I reckon you'll find the money. I heard them talking about it. They were coming to kill me, to cover up. If I was killed escaping then everybody, even the sheriff, would figure me guilty. Only thing was, I objected, and had plenty of help!" He poked a finger into a red curl and admired its softness. "Lovely help!" He repeated the talk he had heard while under the saloon porch.

Colter said, "I'd say this town owes you a vote of thanks, Nelson, for ridding us of two skunks. My thanks will be more substantial. I have a

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DEATH TUNNEL

It was too neat, too cut-and-dried. Slim had been drunk, and he couldn't remember if he had killed Haycox. But Cliff knew his friend well, knew that Slim wouldn't shoot a man in the back, and that he never used his derringer . . .

by Gordon D. Shirreffs

BOOTS clattered on the shale slope and Cliff Cullen hit the ground, shoving his Winchester forward. There was a moment's silence and then Slim Wallace called down the slope. "Go on back, Cliff! I don't want to shoot at *you*."

Cliff lay flat. Slim could shoot like the devil with either sixgun or rifle. The hard earth was hot beneath Cliff's belly. He could smell the sweat which soaked his shirt. The heat beat down in the canyon as if it was a baker's oven. It was hot, even for western

Arizona. Cliff was tired; it had been a long, hot chase after Slim. He shifted a little. "Come on down, Slim!" he yelled. "There's no water up there! I killed your cayuse! What the hell can you do now?"

"I can go over these damned mountains, that's what!"

"You bullhead..." said Cliff to himself. He poked his head out and cursed as Slim's rifle flatted off, sending a slug whining from the hard earth inches from Cliff's head. The echo of the shot slammed back and forth in the canyon only to die away with a *whoom, whoom, whoom* out on the desert flats below the hills. Slim was putting up a good front, but he didn't have a chance. He had no water and no horse. It was a rough trip for a mounted man; impossible for a man on foot.

Cliff pushed himself back and crawled into a clump of catclaw, cursing silently as he ripped his skin. He looked up the slope. Slim was hunched behind a rock with ready Winchester, eyeing the canyon floor. It was a two hundred yard shot. Cliff closed his eyes. He had been raised with Slim on the Agua Fria. They had come west and worked in the mining country of the Kofas. Gradually Cliff had drifted into law enforcement, as deputy-sheriff, while Slim had lived by his wits. Slim had had a run of bad luck at the gaming tables. Dade Haycox had cleaned Slim out. Dade had been found dead in an abandoned house on the old road leading to the Colorado. He had been known to be carrying ten thousand dollars with him. Slim's engraved derringer had been found in the house. Cliff had been sent after the best friend he had ever had.

Shale tinkled on the slope. Cliff raised his head to see Slim making a break for another rock higher up the slope. Cliff cocked his rifle and then let the tall man get into cover again. A vivid picture had flashed across his mind of the time Slim had pulled Cliff out of a canyon which was filling with the roaring waters of a flash flood. Cliff rested his head on his forearms. If he could only be sure Slim hadn't done the job, he would have winged the tall man just to get him back to Mohave Wells. The hell of it was that he believed that Slim *had* done the job. His luck had been rotten. He was in debt and he hated Dade's guts.

THERE WAS a racket on the shale. Cliff looked up to see Slim plunging down the slope like a great, ungainly bird. His elbows worked up and down as he fought for balance. Cliff looked down the canyon. The tall man was heading for Cliff's horse on a desperate chance. "The ivoryhead thinks I won't shoot," said Cliff. He rested the Winchester on a rock.

Slim hit the canyon floor, went down and rolled over, then jumped to his feet and sprinted for the horse. The sights swam about and settled on Slim. It was an easy shot. Cliff shifted the sights a little and fired. Slim hit the ground, pitching his rifle into a brush clump. Beyond him Cliff's horse reared, screaming like a tortured woman. Blood flowed down his flank. He ran forward. Slim turned onto his back and sat up. He looked at Cliff with a strange expression. "Now what the hell did you have to plug your cayuse for?" he asked.

Cliff waved his rifle. "Get up," he said quietly.

Slim wiped the dust from his face. "Now what?" he asked.

"Back to Mohave Wells."

Slim grinned. "Afoot? That's loco, Cliff. We won't make it."

"We'll try."

Slim shrugged. "You got the makin's?"

Cliff tossed the sack to his old partner. Slim rolled two cigarets and handed one to Cliff along with the sack. Slim sat down and lit up. Cliff leaned back against a rock and lit his own cigaret. "Why didn't you plug me when I rode into the canyon, Slim?" he asked.

Slim spat. "I ain't no killer, Cliff."

"You knocked off Dade Haycox."

"Yeh. I guess I did."

"What do you mean by *guess?*"

Slim eyed Cliff steadily. "I was drunk. Poisoned drunk. I remember running into Dade on the old road. Beyond that, I ain't sure of anything, including my sanity." He puffed at his cigaret. "What's the story?"

"Dade was found dead in that old stone house on the river road. He had about ten thousand with him when he he left Mohave Wells. The money was gone. They found that fancy derringer of yours in the house. I trailed you here. That's the story."

Slim picked at his lower lip. "Well, let's get going then."

"One more thing: hand over the money."

Slim slapped his hands against his pockets. "Think I got ten thousand in cash on me?"

"What *did you* do with it?"

"I don't know. That's the God's honest truth, Cliff. *I just don't know.*"

Cliff studied the angular face of the man who had been his best friend. "Whatever gave you the idea you could drink up all the redeye in Arizona, Slim?"

Slim shrugged. "I had a helluva thirst, is all."

Cliff flipped his cigaret away. "Yeh. You sure did. You went on a high lonesome a week before you killed Dade. I knew you were on the skids, amigo, but I never thought you'd sink as low as you did."

Slim nodded. There was a strain on his face. Slim Wallace had always been happy-go-lucky. "If I could only remember," he said quietly.

"You admit you killed Haycox?"

"I guess I did."

"Think, dammit!"

Slim shook his head. "It's no use, Cliff. It's a blank. How did he get it?"

"A .41 caliber slug in the back. Your derringer was a .41."

"In the back?" Slim's eyes were sick with pain as he looked at Cliff. "I musta been loaded to the ears."

"You sure were," said Cliff dryly. "Let's get on the way. We've got a long walk. Sundown will be along in about an hour. We can walk after dark. Camel Spring is twelve miles from here. That's the first stop."

Slim started down the canyon. He spoke over his shoulder. "No chance of forgetting you saw me, Cliff?"

"None."

"Yeh. I figured it that way. Wish to hell it had been anyone but you."

"How the hell do you think *I* feel?"

Slim turned. "Yeh," he said softly. "I guess I failed you, Cliff."

A teamster gave them a lift from Camel Spring into Mohave Wells. It was late afternoon when the two of them got down from the wagon. The sidewalks were lined with silent men watching Cliff and his prisoner. "Never thought Cullen would bring *him* in," said a miner to the man beside him.

"Cullen is a lawman," said the other man. "He'd bring in his own old man if he had to."

SHERIFF Dan Noble leaned back in his chair and eyed Slim. "Where's the money, Slim?" he asked.

Slim shrugged. Noble looked at Cliff. "That's all I could get out of him," said Cliff.

"You admit murdering Dade Haycox?" asked Noble.

Slim held out his hands, palms upward. "You say I did. I don't remember. I suppose I did the job."

Noble took Slim's engraved derringer from a drawer. He held it up. "This is yours, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"It was in your possession when you came to that old house on the river road, wasn't it?"

"Far's I know."

"You shot Dade Haycox with it?"

"I don't know."

Noble tossed the deadly little gun up and down in a big palm. "Tell the truth, Wallace."

"I'm telling all I know. I was drunk. I got loaded in Ehrenberg on a high lonesome. Last thing I remember is seeing the house. Smoke coming from

it. A cayuse outside. I fell off my horse half a mile from the house and cracked my head. Hoss ran off."

Noble looked at Cliff. "Whose horse was he riding when you caught up with him?"

Cliff swallowed and looked away from his friend. "Dade's black. I killed it and chased Slim into Dry Canyon."

"How'd you get Slim?"

"He tried to get my horse. I shot it. Slim gave up."

"He put up a fight?"

"No."

Noble rubbed his jaw. "Lock him up."

After Cliff locked Slim up, he went to his room in the hotel to change his worn boots and filthy clothing. He stood for a long time at the window looking out on the mining town. To the west was the rutted track which was the old river road, abandoned when the new plank road had been laid to Ehrenberg. Eighty miles from town was the house where Dade had been murdered. Cliff looked down at the star on his vest. He would have to stay to testify at the trial. After that he would leave Mohave Wells forever. He went to the clothes press to take out his fresh clothes. He emptied his pockets; watch, tobacco, matches, wallet, handkerchief, loose change, pocketknife and derringer. He picked up the stingy gun and hefted it in his hand. In all the years he had known Slim, he had never remembered the tall man using a derringer. Slim had won the little gun in a poker game. It was a Ballard, finely engraved and chased with silver. He had been offered fifty dollars for it by Ham Orris, the local gunsmith. Cliff hated the little hideout guns. Slim had hit a new low in Cliff's opinion by using the derringer. Few men could match the tall man with either handgun or rifle. Why had he used a derringer to do the job? It was evidence, of just another change for the worse in Slim Wallace.

Cliff left his room after dark and ate in the *Western Star*. He sat for a time at a rear table, slowly drinking a beer. The games were already in progress. A big man pushed his way through the batwings, got a bottle from the barkeep and came to Cliff's table. "Mind if I sit down, Cullen?" he asked.

Cliff shook his head. "Hell no, Coppersmet," he said. "I need company right now."

The mining engineer sat down and poured a drink. "Feel bad about bringing Slim in, eh?"

"Yes."

Coppersmet downed a drink and refilled his glass. "Hell of a note. I couldn't believe it when I heard it."

"Hardly anyone does. It wasn't like Slim."

Coppersmet shook his head. "What'd he say?"

"Says he was on a high lonesome in Ehrenberg. Ran into Dade at the old house. Blanked out somewhere."

"What about the money?"

Cliff shrugged. "He can't remember what he did with it."

"Ten thousand dollars! How the hell can you lose a sum like that?"

Cliff emptied his beer glass. "Shows you how drunk he was."

"Yes. You did a good job bringing him in. Tough on you, though."

"Yes. I'll turn in my badge when this is over. I've had enough of Mohave Wells."

Coppersmet lit a cigar. "You'll be here for the inquest and the trial, though?"

"I have to be."

"Tougher yet." Coppersmet leaned back. "Ten thousand bucks! You figure he cached it somewhere between the house and Dry Canyon?"

"Probably. In that country it would take a magician to find it."

"He might have dropped it somewhere, or hidden it in the house."

"Could be."

Coppersmet emptied another glass. "Well, I've got to get some sleep. I'm heading out of here in the morning."

"So? Where to?"

Coppersmet waved a hand. "Mexico

I think. Lots of good jobs down there in that new mining country."

"You have a good deal here, Coppersmet."

The big engineer smiled. "Yes. But I've got the wanderlust. Never stay too long in one place, Cullen."

Cliff watched the big man leave the saloon. Coppersmet had bucked his way up to the position of chief engineer in the Silver Belle Mining Company. What could he gain in Mexico? The big man lived well. He might find it a bit rough in Sonora.

CLIFF WENT to the sheriff's office. Noble was at his desk. "Cliff, you want to try to find that money?" he asked.

Cliff shrugged. "Where the hell could I look for it?"

"Will you?"

"Let Eddie Lake go. I want no more of this business than I have to take, Dan."

Noble leaned forward. "You go. I've got a damned good reason for asking you."

"So? What is it?"

Noble flushed. "There's some talk around town that Slim might have passed the money on to you."

Cliff sat up straight. "What the hell do you mean, Dan?"

Dan Noble held up a big hand. "Take it easy! I didn't think that one up. Everyone knows how close you and Slim were. That's how those rumors start, Cliff."

"Keep talking!"

"It's like this: someone shot off his mouth that you and Slim might have been in on a deal and that you double-crossed Slim by bringing him in. When Slim pays the death penalty you'll resign, get the cached money, and take off in the clear. Mind you, I am just repeating what I heard."

"I'll de damned! A man does his job. Brings in his best friend and gets accused of pulling a filthy deal like that. Who started that one, Dan?"

"How should I know?" Noble passed a cigar box to Cliff. "Light up. I want you to stick on this case. Go out to that house. Tear it apart if you have to, but find that money. I don't want to lose the best deputy I ever had and I want to stop that damned rumor by having you bring in that money."

"And if I don't find it?"

Noble lit Cliff's cigar. "Your job is set with me, Cliff. But I want you to prove you had nothing to do with the disappearance of that money."

Cliff puffed at his cigar. "Well, I'll be double-damned," he said quietly.

"Will you do it?"

"I'll have to now." Cliff stood up. "I'll leave tonight."

The moon was rising when Cliff neared the old house. It was a lonely part of the country, and few travelers came that way any more. Only the old-timers used the road to get to the river. It was shorter, but rougher. Cliff touched his sorrel with his spurs and rode down to the old house. It had been a swing station on the short-lived Mohave Wells-Ehrenberg Stage Line. Travelers caught on the old road after dark usually used it for shelter. Cliff dropped the reins of his sorrel and went into the house. A mail carrier had found Dade's body and had notified Sheriff Dan Noble. Noble had been sure it was Slim Wallace after finding the stingy gun near the body. It had been Cliff's luck to pick up the trail of his friend.

Cliff lit a candle and placed it on the mantel above the ash-choked fireplace. His boots grated on broken glass and china. There was no doubt in his mind about the exact spot where Dade had been lying. His blood had soaked into the packed earth floor. Cliff wandered through the four rooms of the station. The floors were covered with litter; straw, ragged clothing, broken boxes, glass and china. He eyed the walls. There were a few niches in them, but they were empty. One closet yielded nothing but a broken miner's pick. Cliff went back to the main room and went over it foot by foot. There

was no place where a man could have hidden anything in the house.

He started a fire against the cold of the night and sat down on a box, filling his pipe. He thought back on Slim Wallace. Blanking out was nothing new for Slim. Cliff remembered a number of times when Slim had raised hell and then swore, when sober the next day, that he had been as peaceable as a dove. Yet Slim, a tough man with gun or fists when sober, usually got helpless when loaded with redeye. Cliff had once seen him try to hit a little miner in a barroom brawl and the little man had gone under Slim's wildly flailing arms time and time again to finally cut Slim down to size. How could he have aimed a derringer to kill Dade? Yet, he might have been so close that it would have been impossible to miss. The .41 caliber slug had lodged in Dade's kidneys, obviously from close range, for the soft slug had smashed the gambler up inside. Cliff shrugged and went to get his blankets. He'd get up early and go over the grounds outside the house with a fine tooth comb.

He tethered the sorrel in a leanto and brought in his bedroll and saddle. He threw more wood on the fire and sat back to absorb the heat. The firelight danced on the dirty walls, plastered with obscene remarks made by forgotten travelers along the old road. A light spot caught Cliff's eyes. He stood up and went to look at it. It was a deep pit in the adobe wall, and it looked like a bullethole. His right boot rolled on something hard beneath his feet. He picked it up. It was a flattened slug. He took it to the fire and examined it. He compared it with one of his .44 cartridges. The slug was about .41 caliber. He tossed it up and down in his hand and rubbed his jaw.

Suddenly he went to where Dade had been shot. The gambler had been lying face down with his head toward the spot where Cliff had found the slug. Cliff stood about where the killer must have been standing to kill Haycox. He looked at the wall. He whistled softly. "By God," he said quietly, "there must have been *two* shots fired. But why?" He looked at the slug. It was a common enough caliber in a derringer. Maybe Slim had missed the first shot. From the way Slim acted when he was drunk, he could never have reloaded the stingy gun. With a double-barreled derringer, the tall man could have fired twice. Cliff closed his eyes and thought of Dade Haycox, trying to remember if the gambler had carried a double-barreled derringer. Slim could have disarmed Haycox and used the gambler's derringer for the killing. Then Cliff remembered. Dade usually carried a short-barreled Colt, with filed-off front sight, and with the front of the trigger guard cut away so the trigger finger would hit the button instantly at the time of drawing. Haycox usually carried it in his waistband. He never carried a holstered gun. Cliff had once disarmed him when he had drawn on another gambler. Haycox had been put into the cooler overnight. The cut-down Colt had been his only weapon. Dan Noble had picked it up beside the fireplace. It all came back to Cliff.

CLIFF PUT the flattened slug into his vest pocket. He wandered about the big room. Dade Haycox stuck in his mind. The gambler and Slim Wallace had always been at sword points, but neither one of them would have resorted to murder to get rid of the other. Strangely enough there had always seemed to be a mutual respect between the two for each other. They were both as cold as ice when playing cards or facing an opponent. Suddenly, Cliff stopped his wandering. Slim had left Mohave Wells before there had been any indication from Haycox, a reserved man, that he was planning to leave Mohave Wells. Maybe someone had known he was planning to go; someone who *knew* he was carrying a large sum of money. Cliff racked his brain. Who knew? *Who knew?* Who had been Haycox's closest intimates? He had been friendly with a lot of men,

but none of them had ever seemed very close.

Cliff thought back on the men of the town. Suddenly one man's face appeared as though stamped on his mind. *Floyd Coppersmet!* They had had adjoining rooms in the hotel. Sometimes they ate together. Sometimes they had played in a private game in the gambler's room. Cliff suddenly gathered up his gear and took it out to his sorrel. He saddled the horse and swung up on it, spurring it toward the road. Coppersmet was leaving town the next day? Why? He was deep in debt in Mohave Wells. He was into almost every merchant in town. It was a hunch. Cliff meant to play it out.

Cliff stabled his sorrel and hurried toward the hotel. He passed Sam Silver's clothing store. The old man was closing up. Cliff rapped on the door and the old man came to the door. "Oh, Cullen," he said with a smile, "I'm closing up, son. What do you want?"

Cliff entered the store. "I want to ask you a few questions, Sam."

"Go ahead."

"Does Floyd Coppersmet owe you much money?"

The merchant eyed Cliff. "That's between Coppersmet and myself, Cliff. I don't talk about those things."

"Look, Sam, I'm working on a hunch. Coppersmet owes every merchant in town. No one in town dresses better than Floyd Coppersmet. If he owed anyone money, it would be you. Right?"

"This is official business?"

"Yes."

Sam smiled and waved a hand. "I am happy to say he has paid me off in full."

Cliff felt a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Silver leaned close. "He surprised me, though. He is leaving town. It would have been easy for him to forget about the bill."

"Did he tell you he was leaving town?"

Sam shook his head. "No. I found out. It is good policy to keep track of those who are on your books."

"What about the rest of the merchants. Did he pay them off?"

Sam's eyes clouded. "I do not think so."

"Why you alone, of all the men he owes money?"

Sam waved a hand. "My cousin is payroll clerk up at the mines. You understand?"

"He knew Coppersmet was leaving then?"

Sam flushed. "Yes. It was a tipoff. Coppersmet wanted some new clothes. I would not let him have them without his paying me what he owed me. He was angry, but he agreed, and told me to keep my mouth shut. I do not like trouble, Cliff."

Cliff gripped the merchant by the shoulder. "I see. Thanks. You've done me a good service, Sam." Cliff hurried from the store and went to the hotel. He asked the clerk if Coppersmet was in. "He left about half an hour ago," said the clerk.

"Checked out?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Let me have a passkey."

"Official business?"

Cliff nodded. "If you want your money, you'll let me have it."

The clerk turned quickly and handed Cliff the key. Cliff went up the stairs two at a time. He opened the room. It was empty of the mining engineer's possessions. Cliff returned the passkey and went to the livery stable. Josh Harris, the liveryman, told Cliff that Coppersmet had bought a horse and had left, dressed in trail clothing, and with well-filled saddlebags.

CLIFF GOT his horse and rode to the edge of town. A Mexican taco seller told him he had seen the engineer ride toward the mines, high on the heights behind the town. Cliff spurred the sorrel and headed for the mines. At the gate, he was told that Coppersmet had turned off on the trail that led up Silver Canyon where the old workings were. He had been in a hurry.

Cliff rode into Silver Canyon which was well lit by the moon. At the far end were the old workings, gaunt against the face of a cliff. The heights behind were honeycombed with old drifts and tunnels. Cliff spurred the sorrel up the steep rise. There were fresh tracks leading into a gulch. At the far end was the dam that held back a reservoir, full of water which was used for the steam engines down at the new workings. An aqueduct ran over the gulch to carry the water down to the engines. Close to the edge of the dam was the black opening of one of the original tunnels. Cliff swung down from the sorrel and paddled up to the mine. A dun horse was tethered just inside the entrance. Well-filled saddlebags were on the dun. Cliff drew his Colt and entered the mine. Cold air blew toward him. He worked his way in and turned a bend in the tunnel, stepping back behind a pit prop when he saw a yellow glow of light. A big man was removing something from a hole in the tunnel wall. It was Floyd Coppersmet. The engineer turned, a canvas bag in his huge hands. He picked up a candle lantern and hurried toward Cliff. Cliff stepped out, ramming his Colt into the big man's gut. "Just a minute, Coppersmet," he said quietly, "what are you doing in here?"

Coppersmet was badly startled. "Cullen! What the hell is this?"

"What's in that bag?"

"Money."

"*What* money?"

Coppersmet grinned. "I cached it in here. Didn't trust that damned bank. I'm leaving in the morning and came up to get it. Sort of a private bank."

"So? You didn't check out. You owe a lot of money in town."

"What's that got to do with you?"

"If you had left, there would have been a warrant sworn out for you, and I might have had to serve it. Saves me time."

"You have no warrant now."

"No. But I'm willing to take a chance on taking you in."

Coppersmet flushed. "Look, Cullen. I like you. How much do you make on your job?"

"Fifty a week."

"I'll give you five hundred if you'll forget you saw me."

"No."

"A thousand?"

Cliff spat. "Get going."

"Two thousand?"

"Where did you get all this money?"

Coppersmet smiled. "Gambling."

"You're a liar! You've got the lousiest luck of any man who ever bucked the games in Mohave Wells."

Coppersmet suddenly backhanded Cliff, gripped the Colt and swung it to one side. A big knee came up in Cliff's groin. He grunted with pain and went down as Coppersmet smashed a blow home to his jaw. Coppersmet doused the light, snatched the bag from Cliff's hands, and ran down the tunnel. Cliff fought for control. He got to his feet and grunted as his head smashed into a sagging pit prop. Blinding pain shot through his head and he passed out.

THE ROARING noise awoke Cliff. He touched the lump on his right temple gingerly, and winced. His head swam. He sat up and leaned back against the wall of the tunnel. The roaring became louder. Suddenly he pulled himself to his feet. Water was pouring into the tunnel. He sprinted toward the entrance. Water swirled about his feet and then it was up to his waist, lifting him up against the roof of the tunnel. He tried to swim, but the water dashed him against the wall. He went under and came up gasping for breath. He went under again and felt the water pull him along. He hit the floor of the tunnel and rolled over. Blackness enveloped him. He fought for consciousness. He came up again and saw blessed moonlight. The flood was carrying him down the gulch at great speed. Coppersmet had opened the flood gate of the reservoir. The water dumped Cliff on a rock shoulder and swirled out into Silver Canyon with a noisy roaring. Cliff gripped

the rock and watched the floor carry timber and brush past his feet. He climbed up the rock shoulder and staggered along the old trail to look down into the valley. A man was standing down there beside a fallen horse. The ground all about them was wet. It was the big engineer. He was trying to get the horse to stand up.

Cliff jumped down the slope, gripped a small tree, hung for a moment and then dropped thirty feet, landing spraddle-legged fifty feet from Coppersmet. Coppersmet turned quickly, jerking out a double-barreled derringer. He slipped on the wet ground and went down. Cliff closed in and Coppersmet kicked out with both feet, catching Cliff in the gut. He staggered back, dropping to the ground as the engineer fired the stingy gun. Cliff rolled over and picked up a rock. He hurled it with all his strength. Coppersmet grunted as the rock glanced from his chest. Cliff leaped to his feet and dived on the engineer. He battered at the face beneath him. There was a muffled explosion. Coppersmet screamed. He threw Cliff off and gripped his wounded left leg. Cliff stepped back, gauged his distance, and booted the big man neatly alongside the jaw, falling forward over him as he lay still.

Cliff hammered on the door of Sheriff Noble's quarters, which were beside the jail. Muffled curses came to Cliff as Noble fumbled with the door. The door swung open. "Cullen!" roared the sheriff. "What the hell is this? Did you find the money?"

Cliff jerked a thumb over his shoulder at Coppersmet, sitting his dun with his hands lashed to the saddlehorn. Cliff handed Noble the canvas sack. "There's about eight thousand in here," he said quietly. "You'll have to ask Coppersmet what he did with the rest of it."

"Coppersmet?"

Cliff nodded. "He was quietly taking off. I arrested him on suspicion of the murder of Dade Haycox."

Noble walked out beside the engineer. "Well, Coppersmet, where did you get this money?"

For a moment the big man eyed the sheriff, and then he bowed his head. "It's Haycox's money, all right. I knew he was leaving town. I followed him and got ahead of him to wait for him at the old stage station. I was getting ready to kill him when Slim Wallace showed up. Wallace passed out. I killed Haycox and took Slim's derringer from his pocket and fired it, then I left it in the room where I thought Slim couldn't find it. I came back and hid the money in the old workings. I figured Slim was too damned drunk to know whether or not he had done Haycox in. I was right. He took off on Haycox's black. You know the rest."

Noble turned toward Cliff. "How'd you figure this out?"

"I never thought Slim would, or *could*, do a thing like murder. He might have killed Haycox in a fight, but Wallace just wasn't the type to shoot a man in the back. Besides, I never knew Slim to shoot that fancy derringer of his. In fact, I never saw him load it. Coppersmet admitted to me he fired two shots, missing the first. I found the slug in the station. It was the one clue that set me to thinking."

Noble gripped Cliff's arm. "You've had a rough time. Better go to bed."

Cliff looked down at his wet clothing. "Lucky for me there wasn't more water in the reservoir, or Coppersmet would have done me in, too."

"Water? I don't get it."

Cliff grinned. He took the jail keys from the sheriff's coat pocket. "Let Coppersmet tell you. I'm going to let Slim out."

He turned on a heel and went into the calabozo. Slim awoke at his touch. "What the hell happened to you?" he asked.

"I got a free bath while trying to find the real killer of Dade Haycox. I found him. You're free, Slim."

Slim sat up and gripped Cliff by the wrists. "I didn't do it, then?"

"No."

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END OF THE DAY

by John Lackland

What kind of protection was it that old Henry wanted from the marshal? An off-trail story.

IT WAS near the end of summer, the summer the railroad came to town, that I saw him first. He rode in one afternoon on a horse that had seen better days, his belongings in a carpetbag, and a floppy hat pushed back on his head. I judged his age to be around sixty, and there was a slight stoop in his broad shoulders as he rode up to the hitching post and climbed down. He wasn't a wandering cowboy or peddler, or any kind of tramp; there was an air of quiet dignity about him that shone through his patched and faded clothes.

He hitched his horse, then stood for a moment looking around slowly, and nodded as if everything was just right. It was a little before the railroad crew's quitting time, and the streets weren't crowded. He stood there, rocked back on his heels for awhile, then started in my direction.

He'd been a big man in his younger days, that was plain, and age hadn't shriveled him. He'd lived in the open and worked hard; that was what his weatherbeaten, only slightly-wrinkled face told me. The white hair that showed under his hat was somewhere between long and too long.

"Howdy, Marshal," he said. "Can you direct me to a barber shop?"

I steered him to Farley's, down the way and across the street, and he thanked me and started toward it. I watched him, curious about that half-cultured tone in his voice; from the sound of his words, he could have been a judge, but the language itself was that of an ordinary ranch hand or prospector. There was a half-smile on his face, as if he'd seen just about all the world, done about everything he'd ever wanted to, and now was content to watch younger men struggle.

Someone called to me then, and I had to settle a minor dispute which might have ended in a brawl; then there were some other matters, and when I finally got back, his horse was gone. Later, I found he'd taken it to the livery stable, and had gotten a job assisting the cook at Olson's Restaurant.

I saw him now and then during the next few months; he called himself

"Henry"—that was all. A pleasant old fellow to talk to, and in a way he soon seemed to know just about everyone in town; yet, I wouldn't say that he was on intimate terms with anyone. Once in awhile, I'd see him at one of the saloons; he'd always sit in a corner, nursing a drink and watch what was going on; if someone came up to him, he'd be congenial enough, but he never sought anyone out. It was as if he were just watching the world go by in that same half-interested, half-amused manner.

It wasn't until spring that he came to me with the note he said someone had pushed under his door at the boarding house. He didn't seem really worried, yet it was plain that he wanted to talk with me.

I TOOK THE torn, dirty piece of paper that someone had scrawled a message on; it was printed as painfully as a child draws letters on a blackboard for the first few times. *"Give it up or you'll git kilt."* That was all; no signature, no fancy mark.

"What's it mean, Henry?" I asked him. "What are they after?"

He shook his head. "Not 'they'. Marshal; just one feller who wants the ruby. Belonged to my wife, that ruby did, and it's all I got left now." He closed his eyes for a moment and nodded. "All I got left, and he ain't going to get it."

"Then you know who it is?"

Henry rubbed the back of his hand along his chin. "Got a notion," he said. "Yup, I got an idea who it is, but I don't know the feller's name. Ain't even sure I could describe him to you.

"You see, I stopped in a town not too many months ago—not too far from here—and I was so durned dry that I had too much whiskey. Used to drink right proud, but I sorta got out of the habit after I got married, and I ain't used to it. Have to go easy on the stuff, because I get too danged talkative when I'm loaded.

"Well, I recollect one feller who was hanging around me for quite a spell that night, and he was real friendly. Bought me a few rounds; I guess I must have told him quite an earful. Didn't think any more about it until I left town the next day, when I got a feeling there was somebody following me; after awhile I got sure of it, and I gave him the slip." He chuckled. "Well, I thought I'd given him the slip. Must be getting old. I used to throw Injuns off my trail when I was younger."

I tapped the paper with my fingernail. "This sounds as if he means business, Henry. And whoever it is, he's a cautious one; he's taken his time. You don't carry that ruby around with you, do you?"

"Nope. Had a lucky gold piece on a cord around my neck once, and the cord busted one day, so it was goodbye, gold piece—happened to be climbing a cliff at the time. Nope, this here ruby is hid."

"Yeah, but what one man can hide, another man can find. You're not going to stand shotgun-guard over it all the time, are you? Better take it over to the bank and have it locked up in the safe there for a spell—until we find out who's trying to get it."

Henry shook his head. "Nope, ain't necessary. I don't keep it in my sock, or under the mattress, Marshal." He looked up to glance at my deputy, Luke Hay, who had just come in. "It's hid where he'd never think of looking, and I'll bet you wouldn't either, Marshal.

"I can take care of myself; I ain't worried—just wanted you to know what was going on. Guess I'll start wearing my gun again. Been a long time since I've felt it on my hip, but I've kept in practice."

And that was all I could get out of him. Henry was a friendly one, ready enough to talk and listen, but stubborn as they come.

I kept my eyes peeled for strangers in the days that followed, and checked up on a couple of newcomers who'd gotten jobs in town during the past weeks—but there wasn't much I could

do without giving the show away. Henry allowed that he'd know the man again if he saw him, and said he hadn't seen him around. I managed to see that he got back to the boarding house safe for a couple of nights, and assigned the job of guarding him further to Luke Hay. Luke brought back another note, and this one said, *"I git what I go after."* It was on the same kind of paper, and the printing was the same.

Nonetheless, nothing happened—and it didn't really look as if anything was going to happen. Henry was wearing a gun now, grinning slyly when he met me, and he was still careful about his liquor. He didn't seem to stoop quite as much. I kept my eyes on matters; I was beginning to get an idea as to what this might be all about—only I couldn't figure out any reason for it.

IT WAS ABOUT two weeks later that I went over to Olson's for a late supper; I was having dessert when Olson came out and asked me if I'd seen his helper. Henry hadn't been around for two days. I got the feeling then that maybe I'd muffed things. I hot-footed it over to the boarding house.

No, Mrs. Clinton told me, she hadn't seen Henry that day. There were days on end, sometimes, when she didn't see him—so she hadn't worried. He always showed up, and he was never drunk or boisterous; she figured that maybe he stayed with friends at times.

That didn't sound right to me, though; Henry had no intimate friends. I ran upstairs and pounded on his door. "It's the Marshal," I called out.

The voice on the other side of the door was a little weak; then I heard shuffling footsteps, and Henry unlatched the door and let me in. He was in his nightshirt and looked pale, but there was a grin on his face when he saw me. "Howdy, Marshal," he said. "Come on in; been meaning to drop by and see you."

He tottered back to the bed, as I looked around. "You take that easy chair, there, and I'll git horizontal; feel a mite weak, but I'll be all right. Been fasting."

There wasn't much in the room—just a big bed, a bureau, the chair, and a small table next to the bed. A small lamp was on the table; next to it rested a Bible, Henry's glasses, and a little object that looked like a carved figure. A funny, squat little figure of a fat man with a sort of smile on his face.

I sat in the chair and noticed that I was between the lamp and the window; anyone out there wouldn't see me if I were sitting back. "You ain't had anything to eat today?" I asked Henry.

"Nope. I'm on a fast. Haven't et for two days, but I'll be all right and ready to start in again tomorrow. I fast once a month. ...Guess you've been a mite worried about me, huh? Well, I meant to show you those other notes, but..."

"You've had more messages?" I demanded. "Dang it, Henry," I complained, "that sort of thing's the law's business. You should have let me know about it as soon as you got them."

"Honest, I was going to bring them in...but they sort of slipped my mind." He reached under his pillow. "You see, the first one came day before yesterday, and the second one today."

I frowned. "They 'came'? How?"

Henry shrugged. "Slipped under my door. Didn't notice them until later. People coming and going pretty often here, you know. Couldn't tell when they were delivered." He handed two scraps of paper to me.

They looked the same as the first two, and there was the same labored printing on them. The first note said, *"You think your smart but I'm not fooling."* The second one read, *"Time's running out."*

I let my breath whoosh out. "Hey, now—you didn't steal that, did you, Henry? Maybe run off with some Hindoo's fancy god and his sacred ruby?" I'd heard of wild stories about this sort of thing. There was an Englishman who'd told me hair-raisin' stories

about India and some of the strange gods they pray to there, and priests who went in for fancy revenge. Henry smiled, and I added, "Dang it, I thought you'd been around. You somehow looked like a man who's traveled a lot."

"I've been around the world," Henry said softly, "but I never stole anything in my life. Never had to, I guess. Struck it rich in Silver City in the big boom, twenty years ago. Worked all my life, and made out fair enough—then one day I was a millionaire. Guess I had just about everything that money could buy except a fancy education, and I could have got that at a high-class college in France if I'd wanted to." He sighed. "Had a few things that money couldn't buy, too. They were the best of all."

"Your wife, huh?"

HE NODDED. "Yup, I struck it real rich back there in Silver City. Started out throwing money around as if it were water. Shucks, no matter how hard I spent it, there was still more. Went into a gambling place one night to see if I could break the wheel if I stayed long enough. Threre was a gal running the wheel there, and when I left, she came with me.

"We got hitched and built the biggest house on the fanciest hill in town, built schools, and a hospital, and an opery house, and imported the best singers in Europe to come over and give Silver City a taste of real culture. Then one day I says to Sally, 'Let's get out and see the world'. We figured we'd go on a big tour and stay years if we felt like it.

"People were real nice to us, even if we didn't have fancy manners, though Sally sure was a lady when she put her mind to it. Got ourselves introduced to Queen Victoria, and Louis Napoleon—that was just before the war."

I cleared my throat. "You mean when those Prussians came over and wrecked the Emperor of France? Read about it in the papers."

Henry nodded. "Yeah, we were lucky to get there before old Louis was finished off. ...Well, we toured Europe, and met all kinds of kings and queens and princes and dookes—didn't get to see the Czar, but we sure met a lot of Indian Rajahs; one of them gave Sally this here ruby.

"But it was that old Hindoo in Burma that I liked best of all, I think. He didn't have a dime, didn't have hardly a rag to wear about his middle, but he was happy. He gave me this here statue, and he told me a lot of things which I sort of listened to politely but which didn't mean much to me at the time."

A faint sound came to my ears, and I glanced out the window. The boarding house porch was just below Henry's room. A man could shinny up to the top of the porch easily enough, walk along the roof, and...

"Go on," I said. "What happened; mines run out?"

"I guess they've played out by now," he said. "We figured we'd stay as long as we liked, then come back for more money when we had to. This here Hindoo taught me how to fast, and I've been doing it once a month ever since."

I leaned back in the armchair and eased my gun out of its holster while he was talking with his eyes half-closed, kept my right hand in sight. Once in awhile, being left-handed comes in real handy.

HENRY opened his eyes and picked up the little statue, while I kept an eye on the window. "Everything's got to end," he said, "and the thing to do is end it right when you have to. Sally got sick in Rio de Janeiro, and all my money couldn't save her. When she went, I knew that this part of my life was over.

"I came back and gave everything away. Money couldn't bring back what was past and gone, and nothing could take away what I'd had." He ran his fingers over the figure. "This sort of helps me remember, when I get lonely. You see..."

The rest of the sentence was drowned out by the roar of a gun, and the crash of breaking glass. I cursed; I hadn't been watching sharp enough, and hadn't seen the figure come up, after all. I swung my gun around, fired twice in the direction of the muzzle-spark I'd seen, swinging slightly to either side of it. There was a yell, then the sound of a body falling.

"I'm all right," whispered Henry. "Better see who's there."

I blew out the lamp, then got a hand under the window and managed to lift it without touching the shattered glass. There would only be one man; I was sure of that, at least—and they don't cry out like this one did, or fall as hard as this one did, when they're shamming. I slipped down to the porch roof, a sick feeling at the bottom of my stomach. Now that it was too late, everything was beginning to fit into place, and I was pretty sure I knew who I'd find out there.

As I thought, it was my deputy, Luke Hay. He hadn't been able to resist what looked like a sure thing.

People were pounding at the door when I got back into the room. I called out that everything was under control, and told them to get old Doc Jenkins, as I lit the lamp.

Henry was still sitting up there, a wan smile on his face. "I won't be needing a doctor, Marshal," he said. "Reminds me of a play that we saw back in Silver City, when some high-class actors came there to put on a show. Sally loved it, though I always thought it was kind of foolish. Forget the name, but somebody gets stabbed in it, and before he dies he says that his wound ain't so deep as a well, or so wide as a church door, but it's enough."

His hand slipped down to the bed, and I saw a black mark on Henry's nightshirt. Blood was beginning to soak into a circle around it.

I looked at him. "Is this what you wanted, old timer. To go out in a burst of excitement?"

There was a contrite look on his face. "I didn't mean for anyone to get kilt. Never thought anyone would take it serious that way, Marshal."

I picked up the statue again. "The ruby was supposed to be in here, wasn't it?"

Henry nodded. "Yeah. That's where we kept it while we were travelling. Sally made me promise I'd never sell it...how could I tell her that I'd already given it away to get the best doctor in Rio to leave his favorite female patient and come right over? ...So, I just pretended it was still there all the time."

"And you wrote those notes yourself, huh? I figured that, but I couldn't figure why."

The stain was wider, and Henry's voice was weaker now. "You get used to being a big man, Marshal—sort of get to enjoy everybody making a fuss over you. Then, one day it was all over, like it had never been. What that Hindoo told me kept me from taking to liquor, I guess...but...well, I sort of got lonely, Marshal.

"...Just wanted someone, someone to worry about me a little."

★

Coming Next Issue

SHOWDOWN ON SWIFT-FOX RANGE

by J. B. Allison

WANTED—WOMEN!

Special Feature by Lee Thomas

THE Pony-Express rider brought the news to San Francisco, there in the early 1850s; he even had the New York newspaper wherein the proclamation was printed. They pinned the notice onto the bulletin board in front of the Wells-Fargo building and miners, bearded and dirty and loaded with gold, crowded around.

One miner, who could not read, asked of his companion, "What does that thar newspaper clippin' say, Shorty?"

"Women is comin' to California."

The miner scowled and tugged his beard and eyed his partner critically. "You in yore right mind, Shorty? What fer would women come to Californy for?"

"Make wives for us miners."

The miner whistled, "Well, I'll be darned! They're shippin' in a bunch of females, eh? What does the newspaper say, Shorty?"

Another gold-seeker, also unable to read, asked, "Sure, read it all fer us, Shorty?"

Shorty read slowly, haltingly: "Among the privations and deteriorating influences—" Shorty stumbled over the big words, not being able to pronounce them or understand them, "—to which the thousands who are flocking thither will be subjected, one of the greatest is the absence of woman, with all her kindly cares and powers, so peculiarly conservative to man under such circumstances."

A miner cut in with, "What in the dod-nabbed does all them words mean, Shorty?"

"Me, I dunno. I only went to the second reader."

One of the Wells-Fargo clerks, who had been listening, informed them that it meant that they, the '49ers, needed the gentling influence of women. To this the three agreed, winking at each other.

"Bring 'em females on," one said enthusiastically.

Another declared, "We'll make them good husbands...after they make us all take baths an' shave an' de-louse."

"You read it, clerk," Shorty said, anxious to get out of the task. "An' explain them high-soundin' words as you go along, eh?"

The clerk read, "It would exceed the limits of this circular to hint at the benefits that would flow to the growing population of that wonderful region, California, from the introduction among them of intelligent, virtuous, and efficient women. Of such only is it proposed to make up this company. It is believed there are hundreds, if not thousands, of such females in our country, who are not bound by any ties that would hold them here—who might, by going thither, nave the satisfaction of employing themselves greatly to the benefit and advantage of those who are there, and at the same time of serving their own interest more effectually than by following any employment that offers to them here."

The clerk explained. "This woman who wrote this says there are lots of unmarried women back in New York who would like to come to California and marry up with you men and build homes."

"She sure goes the long way around to say somethin' simple," a miner grunted. "No use readin' us the rest in them big words, clerk. Translate it into Californy langwidge, eh?"

THE CLERK did. The notice had been printed at the insistence of Mrs. Thomas Jefferson Farnham, a former matron of Sing Sing prison, an

earnest and good woman who wanted, through the soft influence of her sex, to take some of the rough edges off the gold-rush miners, who were rather adept at jumping claims, getting drunk, and handling knives, rifles and six-shooters.

The plan stipulated that all women who wanted to go to California should be 25 or over and that a pastor should accompany the group to tie all the marital knots. One miner jokingly pointed out that the only difference between the word *marital* and *martial* was that in the latter the *i* was on the nigh side of the *t*.

These females would each kick two hundred and fifty bucks into the kitty. This combined sum would pay for the chartering of a steamship, the *Angelique*, to take the women around the Horn and into San Francisco harbor.

Many influential men and women okayed the plan. The miners okayed it, too; long, loud, and drunkenly and riotiously. The ship, so the word went around, nad already left New York, carrying its load of beauties to the West Coast. The closer the *Angelique* got to San Francisco, the more beards fell into wastepaper baskets and onto the ground. Miners who had never had a suit of clothes in their lives suddenly became Beau Brummels. Boots were changed for shoes—highly-polished shoes—and some even gave up swearing and spitting tobacco-juice. A few, it was reported, threatened to also forsake drinking, gambling, and fighting.

They did not know that Mrs. Farnham had become ill back in New York and therefore unable to prosecute her plan to a successful end. As it was, when the *Angelique* cleared New York harbor, three fair damsels graced the decks—the cargo was *only* 247 females shy.

But the miners, because of lack of communications, did not know this; all they knew was that the *Angelique* had sailed, and they figured 250 angels were on the deck, waiting for sight of the Golden Gate.

The miners needed women, too. A census taken but a short while before showed less than 200 females in San Francisco. The year 1849 saw 40,000 immigrate into the Golden Area, but of these, only an odd 700 were of the female sex. Miners had married every female in sight, be she white or red.

So, they waited nervously; fights sprang out between men who had worked claims shoulder to shoulder, men who had shared the same grub and same blankets. The girls in the red-light districts saw a fluctuation—downward, of course—in their earnings. Of all the citizens in California, these were possibly the only persons who hated the coming of the women.

At last, the *Angelique* hove into sight.

The sailship came through the Golden Gate, its sails idle on masts as steam propelled it. The sun glistened on white canvas, the ocean was calm and welcoming, and men—shaved, perfumed, bathed, well-dressed—lined the wharf, shouting and hollering. Majestically the *Angelique* made contact, the mooring ropes went out, the ship was tied hard and fast.

The hour—the long awaited hour—had finally arrived. Bugging eyes watched for damsels to trip down the gangplank. Women, two hundred and fifty of them; beautiful, intelligent, lovely, alive, warm!

Only three women—and they all married to residents who had gone ahead of them—came down the gangplank. Immediately they fell into the arms of their husbands.

"Where is the rest, Captain?"

"Ain't no more; the plan fell through."

Disappointment was a live force rippling through the men. They cursed and jumped and swore and fought just for the hell of it. One authority says that on that night, San Francisco had more fights and drunks and gambling than ever before.

The gentling effect of the women, one said, was sorely needed.

Old man Killigan had fought it out with the deputies.

JUDAS SET-UP

by Cliff Campbell

One of these three had betrayed him to the law, years ago. Now he had them where he wanted them, set up in a situation where the guilty one would try to do it again . . .

THREE PERSONS sat eating the greasy dinner at the oilcloth table in the *Cantina de O'hara* at the Fargo Forks crossroads. Before the railroad spur was built down the Lariat Valley to Lariat Center some twenty odd miles to the east, the crossroads had been a busy place. The freighters, bringing cargo down from the former end of the rail-line, passed through there; there were also three stage lines. But with the extension of the railroad, it all petered out. Now one coach made a trip up from Dobe

once a week to meet the line that ran westward every other day to Moose Branch. That was all.

The store and the handful of cabins at the intersection were abandoned, caving-in derelicts. They stood like blind sentinels at the crossing beside Squawman Creek's sluggish, yellow waters. There was only the cantina left, and the two men and one woman eating there now had agreed when they first sat down that the place was a fester-sore on the tail-end of creation.

The cantina had been built by one Miguel O'hara, a shy-smiling little Mex who'd been dubbed "O'hara" by a father in honor of a very brave gringo who'd saved his life once below the line. But when the crossroads business began to die, Miguel O'hara had sold out to a one-eyed breed and gone back to the home of his fathers in Mananaland.

"That's the way the story goes, anyways," said Bobo Rogers, a flat-bodied man with abnormally high cheekbones. Above them, his eyes looked like elongated chips of glass. He was plainly garbed, with one tied-down holster on his left thigh; but he ate right-handed. He poised a chunk of beef before his slice of mouth. "Miguel was a nice gent—they say."

The woman, Julie Cloud, with glowing dark red hair, looked across the table. "You've lived up this way?" she asked.

Nothing happened to Rogers' face actually. It just went dead, and a light like a cold flame behind his eyes said, *"Be careful."* He shrugged. "Been through here before, few times. Reckon it was over Red Dog way I heard the yarn." Red Dog was the range town down the line to the southwest. "You come from these parts, ma'm?" That was only a half lie.

Julie smiled prettily out of her dark eyes. She shook her head as she smoothed her dress down over her high-bosomed figure. She wore too much rouge, and had too bold a stare for a lady. "Oh, no. I—I have relatives in this part of the country; but I've never been here before." That was a whole lie.

"Me, neither," put in Dan Taley, a little, birdfaced man in a sombre black suit of broadcloth. He was a banker. He shook his head of thinning light yellow hair to accent the statement. And that was a lie, too.

THE WAITER came in—a big slouching man in a dirty apron—with a pan of fresh biscuits. Something like a six-gun butt jutted beneath the apron. They didn't notice it though—nor the fact that the one-eyed breed proprietor had not yet put in an appearance. Rogers slid the coffee pot at the waiter.

"Suppose, gopher, you take this gullywash back and bring us some hot java. And—hot!" he ordered.

The slouching man rolled an eye uglily down at him. It wasn't the look of a servant in a mangy little cantina. "Yeah? Sorta persnicketty, ain't you, pard?" Then he turned and shuffled out to the kitchen with Bobo scowling in puzzlement after him.

Julie Cloud wiped her mouth with an exaggeratedly dainty gesture. She flashed a longing look at the shot glass of whisky beside Rogers' plate. "There' something—something strange about this place. It—it's real spooky-like." She looked around at the yellowed seamed walls of the little dining room and through the open side door into the adjoining barroom. That was empty. "I—" She dropped a hand to her pocketbook on the chair beside her. There was a nice little double-barrelled derringer in it.

Rogers glanced around. "Nothing to fear here. Why—" He paused as he saw the bartender lounging in the connecting doorway. He sucked on a cigaret and regarded them with cold insolence a full moment before he turned away. "Nothing. Less'n it's that one over there." He speared a knife at the man diagonally across at a corner table in the front.

The gent sat half-crouched in a

chair, head on his chest. Even as they glanced over, he snored softly, apparently sleeping off a skinful of red-eye. He was medium-sized with bat-wing-chapped legs sprawled out before him. A large-brimmed sombrero, sloped forward on his eyebrows, hid his face. Water from a leak in a corner of the room had splotched a dark uneven pattern on one corner of his hickory shirt; he seemed oblivious to it.

Taley never knew what made the thing pop into his mind, or what made him voice the thought, either. Perhaps it was that double slug of rye whisky he'd had when he came in wet from the trail an hour before. "Used to know a ranny down this way. Fella by the name of Killi—" His eyes hooded warily. "Killi-cut—or was it just plain 'Killy'," he added, changing what he had been going to say.

Rogers became busily engaged in mashing a biscuit into the gravy on his plate. "Never heard of no jasper by that name."

The woman only looked blank as she drew out a small hand mirror and primped at her hair, but her silence was as much of a lie as Bobo Rogers' denial. The name the banker had been about to say was "Killigan." Bigger Killigan had been the man.

"And a wire-tough bitter-ender of a piece of man, too," Rogers was adding to himself. He had known him real well.

WALLACE KILLIGAN had been his name by baptism, but down through that chunk of the Southwest he had been known as "Big" Killigan. Not because he was large in hulk; he wasn't. But there had been something indomitable about the man, something behind the half-humorous face with sad, strikingly black eyes. Those eyes could flame with bitter savage fury too. And when they did, hombres facing him felt suddenly puny and insignificant.

Big Killigan had been declared an outlaw, and he didn't make his living by any business inside the bounds of the Law. But back then, two county sheriffs had admitted they would never arrest him, much less attempt to bring him in. They savvied what had sent Killigan back into the broken hills country to live like a wild thing despising human critters.

It had happened when he was just a beardless button in his teens. The big Bearpaw Cattle Pool had moved onto the Upper Red Dog range, buying out the old Box-T, and then acquiring some of the smaller spread. But Big Killigan's father had refused to sell out at their price.

Onslow, boss of the Bearpaw, was a range-pirate; what he couldn't get one way he acquired another. Old, blunt, simple Mike Killigan had found himself in court fighting a charge that his title of ownership was spurious. Old Mike couldn't help it if the original owner hadn't filed properly; all he knew was that he had paid for it and worked it. The boy, Big, thought the same way. That was why he put a slug through the chest of the deputy who shot his dad in the fight, the day the posse came to evict them from the land. That had made him an outlaw.

In his bitterness, he had accepted the role gladly; incessantly, for three-four years, he had warred on the Bearpaw that had bought his father's place at auction. Then, one night in Red Dog, they'd captured him and sent him up to the Big House on the killing charge.

Bobo Rogers knew every detail of the story because once he had ridden Big Killigan's bunch. At the thought, his face got a haunted look.

Julie Cloud had known Big Killigan too. Once she had worked in Red Dog as a singer at a honkytonk. And the night they had cornered him, when he had come running to her cabin to hide as the badge-packers closed in, she had slammed the door in his face. It was something she'd like to forget, too.

As he fired up a stogie, Banker Dan Taley's eyes were still hooded. No-

body now would ever guess he was the same Black Dan Taley, hard-drinking card-sharp of Red Dog almost eight years ago. He recalled Killigan too; he had owed Killigan some dinero when they captured him. But, shucks, what would a gent in the Big House for life do with money, anyway? His head jerked nervously doorward as he thought he heard somebody outside in the thin hissing rain.

THE WAITER brought back the fresh pot of steaming java, slapping it down on the table so some of it sloshed out the spout. Only it wasn't the same waiter; this was a little man with a bar of black mustache that hid most of a scrawl of scar on his upper lip. Rogers saw that he was another man as the latter turned away, saw too the shoulder rig as his coat flapped wide a moment. The slices of glassy eyes narrowed and he eased a hand down toward his own holster. He wished to blazes old Spike Hontell would get here. When he had ridden in day before yesterday, it seemed Spike had left a message for him saying he would be back shortly.

Julie Cloud put down her emptied coffee cup and shivered slightly. "That westbound stage just has to come along soon. I never could spend the night here." She had arrived that midday on the coach from the north that made connections with the line that ran into Red Dog. "I never could spend the night here at all."

"Looks like you're a-going to, ma'm. The Red Dog stage won't be through here today—or tonight." It was the man in the corner who had apparently been slumbering. He was standing now, absolutely steady, small but perfectly round eyes drilling into them across the room. "There was an attempt made to hold it up—and it turned back to Lariat. ...My boys made the attempt."

Taley came out of his chair, one white-knuckled hand around the heavy gold watch-chain bridging his vest. "Say, who are you—"

MOVING from behind the corner table, with that curiously relaxed motion of his body, the medium-sized gent whipped off his sombrero. "Big Killigan! Don't you remember me, folks?"

Rogers was the only one who had not moved. He peered with eyes twisted from beneath the lock of sandy hair hanging over his forehead. Then he dropped the match with which he had been about to light his tube of Durham. He started to bend to recover it from the floor.

"Don't!" Big Killigan's easy voice had become as sharp as a gunshot. "Don't—Bobo! I always was a split second faster 'n you on the draw. Remember? Besides, Bobo, you're covered—well covered." He gestured around.

In the doorway to the barroom stood the lank bartender, a gun already sweeping the room. Back by the entrance to the kitchen was the big slouching man who had served them, already whipping a couple of hoglegs from beneath his greasy apron. And in the rear corner stood the little man with the scar-hiding mustache, face pinched up as he waited with thumbs hooked over cocked hammers.

"My boys," Big Killigan explained. "The breed owner took a little vacation for a few days... My new bunch."

Rogers summoned a grin as he pulled his hand away from the gun scabbard as if it had turned white-hot. "Shucks, Big! I figgered you might uh been sore 'cause I got orey-eyed and wasn't no help the night the John Laws grabbed you. Shucks, Big. You know—"

Killigan scratched a match on a thumbnail and put it to the quirly spiking from good-natured generous-curved mouth. "Hell, Bobo. A gent's got to irrigate his tonsils once in a while—and Fate ain't in the habit of telling him what's coming up next in the deal."

Banker Taley was erect and kicking back his chair. "See here, Mr. Killi-

gan. There happens to be a lady present and—"

Killigan cocked an eye at him as he came closer. He'd always had a knack of seeming to move without effort. And very silently. "The same old hoorawing tinhorn, eh? Old Black Dan! And as far as a lady, well who said she was—"

"'Black Dan'?" repeated Taley pompously. "I don't know who you're talking about. And I don't know you either, for that matter. I—"

"Changed your handle to 'L' Taley now, eh, Dan?" Without seeming to move, Killigan sent the hot match flipping from his fingers. It arrowed right at the undersized ex-gambler banker, stinging his cheek with its hot tip.

Taley squealed as he ducked too late and pawed at his whitish skin. "Damn you, Big! Damn you," his transparent feeble bluff collapsed. "Say, you should be in prison. You must be a fugitive and—"

The scrape of the extra chair Big Killigan pivoted out from the table broke off Taley's word as he cowered. The outlaw bestrode it, folding his arms across the back. "Don't git hopeful idees, Dan. In view of the circumstances of the killing, the governor pardoned me 'bout seven months back. I ain't no fugitive—yet. After this night's done though..." He let it hang there.

JULIE CLOUD was perfectly cool. She reached across, took Rogers' shot of redeye and put it down her throat with an experienced flip. "Of course I remember you, Big. Even with that premature gray at your temples. You are always four square in my book—and never small potatoes. But I don't understand this?"

"No-o?" said Killigan softly as he let his black holes of eyes take in every detail of her pretty face. The eyes grew sadder a moment. Then he gestured to his men. "Clean the hardware off 'em, boys!"

They got Rogers' hip gun; it was all he had. And the derringer from Julie Cloud's bag. On the banker, they found a short-barrelled .32 hidden in a rig beneath a shoulder; another in his waistband beneath his austere white shirt; and a third, a derringer, down one of his boots. Killigan laughed at him silently.

"Well, you always did like to have an ace or so up your sleeve, Dan... All right. Listen close—and you'll understand things." He pointed at Julie with his smoking quirly. "I told you the stage to Red Dog you're waiting for won't be along. My boys made it turn back. You don't want to go to Red Dog anyway, Julie."

She lifted her nose scornfully. "Mosby Purcell is—"

"It was me wrote you that letter signed 'Mosby Purcell,' Julie. He ain't waiting for you; he ain't got a big outfit with a dobie hacienda or nothing, and he ain't still in love with you and craving to marry you—because he died about four years back when he got orey-eyed and fell oft the creek bridge and drowned. Me, I sent you the money to make the trip down this way, too."

The woman sat with her jaw unhinged stupidly. For a moment, it looked as if she would cry. Then her nostrils pinched in and the hard lines, bred by her rough life, gullied her face. And suddenly the men in the room realized her red hair was dyed now. "Then—then, why did you—"

Killigan had already turned to Bobo Rogers. For a moment, the outlaw's eyes crinkled around the corners as if thinking of old times. "Bobo, I brought you down here too. A rider looked you up with a message from your old pard, Spike Hontell. The rider told that Spike said he was sick in bed, living his last days, and how he'd like to see you... Bobo, knowing you and how you liked the skirts, I knew that would bring you along. Old Spike did have a mighty fancy-looking daughter, didn't he? Well, she up and

married a beef buyer and went to K. C. to live some time back. Where Spike is, I don't have no idea. But he ain't in Red Dog. So they's no sense in going there, is there?"

Bobo's hand was very steady as he plucked the quirly stub from his lips. "'Bout as much as spitten in the crick to start a flood, Big... Something's eating on you plumb bad, boss."

"Uh-huh... Mebbeso tonight I'll square it afore we leave here—them what does leave." He turned to Taley who sat perched on the edge of his chair and sized him up with a sneer. "Aw, stop whining, Dan. You always was a two-spot."

"I ain't saying nothing." Taley managed to make it sullen.

"You're still whining, somehow...

"Dan, you got a letter too. A nice lawyer's letter down to your bank. Said as how one Texas Kelso had left a chunk of dinero for you with this lawyer before Texas died. And seeing as how Texas didn't make his money exactly legal, the lawyer fella thought it better to meet you out here on the quiet. Reckon you know that lawyer was me, now, Dan. But I knew it'd bring you; you'd row yourself up Mud Creek with your nose for a paddle to git your dewclaws on a few dollars, by grab!"

Taley plucked at the watch-chain. "If it's money you—"

"I'm collecting my payoff—but it won't be in money tonight, Dan! Not by a danged sight!" He drummed thoughtfully on the table.

Bobo turned and signed to the man in the barroom doorway. "Bring us in a bottle of redeye. I'll pay for it. Big, I reckon I ain't forgot how your old bullet wounds itch ya on a wet night. Few shots always used to make 'em let up a mite."

Big Killigan cut his eyes over to his one-time gunman, then pulled away as if he feared he might soften. The bottle came and the three men had a drink, Taley sloshing his down his shirt front.

"Yep, folks, I'm outa prison. I've been spending a heap of time tracking you three down... And it weren't because of the love overflowing my heart. Naw... You see, the night they grabbed me in Red Dog, somebody sold me out to them badge-packers... It was—one of you three..."

THE ROOM was abruptly hot and close-cramped as if somehow the walls were pushing in on them. Bobo Rogers nodded, watching his former boss. Killigan made a little groove in the oilcloth with his thumbnail.

"I know that... Word got to me in the Big House about it. Don't argufy!" He flipped up a hand as Taley opened his jaw. "I know! And they were only three who could have sold me out—you three."

He stood up slowly and those at the table got that little insignificant feeling as his eyes raked them. "You, Bobo, you was camped with me up on Crow Peak. You knew I was going into Red Dog that night."

Rogers n o d d e d. "Yeah, I knew, Big."

Killigan indicated the woman with his head. "Julie, back in them days, I reckon I was in love with you. You seemed prettier than a spotted pony. I had an engagement to meet you that night. So *you* knew I was coming in, too."

The woman's mouth twisted but she said nothing.

"Dan, you owed me some dinero. I lent it to you when the Hasling boys gave you twenty-four hours to pay up or hit the trail. You was ready to pay me, and I'd sent you word through your brother that I'd be in that night. So—"

"By grab, Big, I'll pay you now—with interest. I—I'll pay you d-double."

"This is going to be paid in blood, Taley. You knew I was coming in, so you could have tipped off the John Laws too... Anyways, it was one of you three. *One—of—you!*"

"What're you going to do, Big?" Bobo asked calmly.

Big Killigan didn't answer. Slapping on his sombrero, he walked over to the stairs that led to the bedroom up above. Climbed them. Out of sight at the top, his voice came back.

"Bring Rogers up first, boys."

Bobo rose before two of them closed in on them. He poured himself a fresh drink, smiled around, then dumped it off. And he walked across the room and up the stairs with a fixed smile. The man with the black mustache came back to stand guard with the lank one who'd acted as bartender.

It was some twenty minutes later when Bobo Rogers came down those stairs. He half-stumbled down, one hand taloned to the railing, head wobbling sleepily. His face was bruised and swollen with blood running from a fist-gashed lip and his nose as well. The mustached one walked over and gave him the bottle to swig from. When Bobo lowered it, he managed a lopsided grimace meant for a grin.

"Prison didn't soften him up none at all." Then the other two knew for certain that Rogers hadn't admitted to playing traitor to Killigan.

"You—Taley," said the big slouching man. And he gave the timid ex-gambler a shove as the latter inched away from the table.

The rain had ceased to spit against the dobie building when Dan Taley fumbled his way down the stairs. He bore no marks. But his face was like dust-colored parchment with his teeth outlined through the thin lips ripped back tightly. "He—he can't do that," he quavered. "He can't."

What he meant was that Big Killigan had informed him he knew where he lived and worked now, knew he had married the daughter of the retired president of that bank. And Big had threatened to send word to the president about how Taley had been a one-time card sharp, a drunkard, and crooked in the bargain.

Lips parted, the woman waited. Chuck, the slouching one behind Taley on the stairs, looked back for his orders. Then he turned to the woman and signalled her to come. Rising, she swayed a moment. Bobo saw her small white teeth gouge into her lower lip. She half pirouetted to flounce out her skirt, then moved up the stairs with red head high.

JULIE CLOUD wasn't long in returning. She held a wisp of handkerchief to her red-eyed face as she came back down. But when she got behind the table once again, she broke. With a dry sob, she signalled to the bottle, swallowing the drink in one gulp when Bobo poured it. Every last day of her age marked her face.

"How—how did he know I have a young daughter and wh-where she—" She broke off, burying her head in her arms. Big Killigan had used the daughter as a club over her, threatening to send the child the truth about her mother. "That man—he—h-he hasn't a heart any more. He—"

It was the boots of Big Killigan on the stairs that silenced her. He had been under strain too. The little gullies furrowed in his face from his freckled short nose down to the corners of his mouth told that. Heeling out his quirly on the floor, he hiked at his gunbelt.

"All right. None of you confessed—as I expected. Never counted on that at all... But one of you made a slip, a bad one. You—"

"It was him—him!" screeched Taley frenziedly, jumping up as he levelled a shaky finger at Bobo Rogers. "I could see it on his face all the time—that dirty guilty look. He—"

"Stop blatting, Dan!... One of you made a slip... It told me who did it—who sold me out to the badge-packers." He turned to Chuck and told him to bring the ponies out of the shed. "We'll be leaving—all but one of us..."

Chuck went out through the kitchen and they heard the rear door slam. It was very still in the front room of the

cantina, Big Killigan studying the tip of his quirly with an unreadable face. Taley's jaw worked a couple of times as he mopped his face with a big bandana, but he said nothing.

Outside, a gun crackled twice. There was a yell of surprise, a chopped off oath— Then they heard the sudden drum of hoofs splashing through puddles. A horse whinnied. Killigan and his men had galvanized, their weapons leaping into their hands. "What the—"

The back door slammed and the bar was plunked across on the inside. And Chuck, wild-eyed, rushed into the front of the place, holding a smoking gun. "Cripes, Big! Half the pants-wearing citizens of Red Dog County is outside! It's Spur Onslow of the Bearpaw heading 'em, and—"

A hail of lead spattered against the outside walls of the place. Splinters jumped from the shutters of one of the windows to yell back an answer to voice rose above the turmoil.

"Come out and give yourself up, Killigan, ya danged coyote!" somebody outside ordered fiercely. "Come out or we'll blast the damn place down!"

Without moving, Killigan seemed to take on inches in stature. He said, finally, "How in tarnation did them pack rats know I was down this way?" Then he moved toward one of the shuttered windows to yell back an answer to them.

Bobo leaped in his path. "Easy, boss! Even if they been tipped off, they can't be absolutely sure you're here now! Don't answer!"

There was a little flicker, of humor perhaps, in Big Killigan's eyes when he cut them at Bobo. Then the outlaw boss was coolly taking command as fresh lead whacked into the sides of the building. "Git that lamp on the table over behind the counter... Douse the ceilin' lamp, Chuck!... Hell, this place has so danged many doorways to cover—"

At a sound out in front, he leaped to the front door, yanked it open, and triggered twice. There was a bellow of pain out there before he slammed it closed and dropped the bar across on the inside. "And so many windows, too!

"Chuck, you take the window on this side!" He thumbed at the lank one who'd posed as the drink wrangler to get into the barroom and take the windows there. The man with the black bar of mustache he put at the rear door to the kitchen. "Bobo—" He hesitated, then went on. "Git upstairs! The stand of cottonwoods comes right down smack 'gainst the left side of this place. They might try to git from one of them in a second-floor window or onto the roof. They's a trap door in the roof. A man could git in or—"

He didn't finish it as he and his one-time pard locked eyes a moment.

"Nobody'll git in that trap door—alive, boss." And Bobo Rogers hit the stairs two at a time after grabbing his hoglegs from a side table where they'd been laid. "This is like old times, Big!"

"You!" Killigan jabbed a finger at the openly quaking banker, Taley. "There's a dirt cellar under this place with an outside entrance. Git down there, an'—" When Taley shook his head and whined incoherent words, the outlaw picked up one of the guns stripped from Taley and shoved it at him. "Git down there! Chuck, throw him down!"

Chuck grabbed the ex-gambler banker by a shoulder, hustled him over to a door beneath the staircase, and thrust him down the stairs to the dirt cellar. Killigan and the red-headed woman measured stares.

"There's an outside stairs running up the back of this place, Julie," he said.

"Big, you haven't got any right to make innocent folks risk their lives 'cause you're in a trap! No right! I've always been y o u r friend, Big. I thought a heap of you. I'd never have betrayed you and—"

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"If you think so much of me, then you'll stand by me now, woman!" He picked up her derringer and walked over to her with it. "That door onto the outside staircase is in the back room upstairs... Right next to the door is a little window—so you can see anybody coming up it. Now—"

"With this pea-shooter, I'm supposed to hold off—"

"You can plug a man through the window pane at close range, Julie... Then come to the head of the stairs here and yell for me. Git going!" The report of Chuck's gun punctuated the remark.

HE AND CHUCK were left alone in the dining room of the cantina. The gunman had opened a shutter at each window a few inches so he could fire through. But after the woman had disappeared upstairs, Chuck walked unconcernedly away from the window with a grin.

"It sure is a slick trick, boss. The one what tries to sell you out this time and go over to the enemy will be the one who double-crossed you before and— Hey, them jaspers outside is sure careless with their lead!" he added. A slug had zipped through the aperture of one set of shutters to plunk into the opposite wall.

Taley's bleating came through the open doorway to the cellar. "Big! Don't make me stay down here a-alone! I *always* was for you! I wouldn't double-cross you to save my own hide, I swear!"

Killigan bawled at him to stay down there or get his head punched off his shoulders if he came up. There was the chop-chop of Bobo's weapon from the front of the second floor. Immediately on top of it came the almost-human cry of a hit horse outside.

Chuck ran to one of the front shutters. "Shucks, Big, you told them lunkheads to stay back under cover so they wouldn't git hurt," he cried as he saw

[*Turn To Page* 88]

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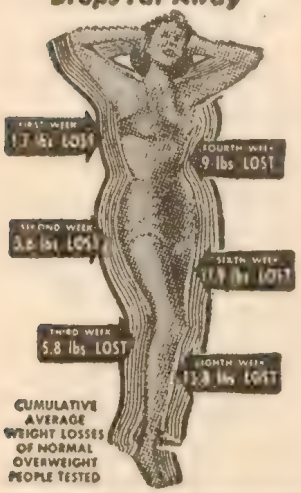

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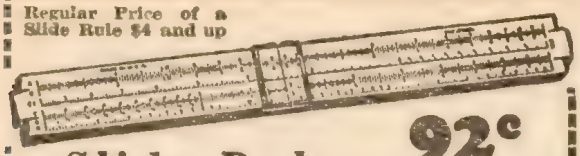

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a wounded animal rolling in the moonlight out there. The gusty wind was dissipating the storm clouds rapidly and a crescent of lemon-hued moon had fingered through the overcast.

From the barroom, Tombstone Tom, the lank one, cut loose with an outburst of fierce fast triggering. Something about his shooting sounded as if it were in dead earnest. "Big! Big!" he hollered through the doorway. Then he stuck his head through to go on, hoarsely, "Big, they ain't the rest of our bunch out there! It's a real posse, I reckon! Onslow is *really* out there—I spotted him by his bald head, boss!"

Big's jaw dropped. Then he whirled and went to a window, dropping to his knees as he worked a shutter wider. After a few moments, he jerked it back and turned into the room, nostrils working.

"Something's gone wrong, Chuck... I just glimpsed Onslow myself. This ruckus is on the level—after all! It's our skins or—"

Big Killigan hadn't warred with Onslow's Bearpaw and escaped capture as long as he had because he lost his head easily. He stood a moment with eyes slitted. But at the same time he was checking the cartridge chambers of his hoglegs. "Tell Elmon in the back, Chuck!" Then the boss was at one of the side windows, drilling away at the shadowy figures outside. But after a moment, his firing fell off; he shifted back as a couple of well-aimed slugs sliced wood from the shutter beside his face.

"Git set! I figure they're going to rush us!" he bellowed through the place. They were dismounted and drawn back into the cover of the brush around the place. He eyed the walls of the interior with a lopsided grin. "Never figured I'd cash my chips in some mangy hole like this," he muttered to them.

THE SCHEME had gone amiss somehow. The way it was to have

been, when Chuck had gone out back and signaled with a lantern, the rest of the outfit should have come busting in and faked an attack. He was to have placed the three suspected of having double-crossed him before at three crucial spots, as he had done—spots from which they could slip out and join the attackers if they wished. And the one who had, he'd figured in advance, would be the guilty one, the one who had sold him out some years ago.

But now it was a genuine attack with Onslow himself out there. The payoff had come. He wondered at the unshattered stillness, why they were delaying in moving in and smoking him out. "They'll never take me, alive! Ain't no charge against me now. But Onslow'd have my neck in a rope and dancing on air so danged fast that—" Then his head dropped.

He was thinking of the three captives. Two of them were innocent. He had no right to risk their hides... His gun muzzles lowered slowly. To be fair to the innocent, maybe he'd better surrender...

In the unnatural quiet, Chuck's boots sounded hollowly as he returned from the rear. The gunman's face was grimly set as he paused at the door to the cellar. "Keep your peepers peeled down there, banker man! We can keep fifty men outa this place! One rush and they'll have a bellyful... You hear me, huh?" he called down. There was no reply. "Hey, Taley?"

The silence from below was mocking in its emptiness. Chuck opened his mouth to call again and saved his breath as his eyes switched to meet Big Killigan's.

"So Dan Taley was the rat who sold me out before, eh..." Then Big set the example by going into action. This was no time for bitter recrimination; as he barked at Chuck to shut the door into the cellar, he was already shoving over the big table to ram it against

[*Turn Page*]

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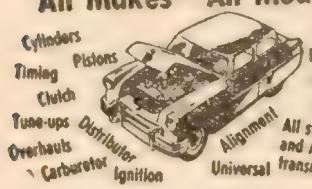

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it as a barrier. They piled stuff on the table and then braced a chair between its back edge and the rear wall of the room. Still, there was no volley of gunfire from the outside.

"What's the matt—" Big started to call. A furious blast of lead into the four sides of the place wiped out his words. One of the shutters sagged outward as its upper hinge was smashed. Then from upstairs came the crash of a bullet, the report like reverberating thunder as it was pent in by the confines of a room.

"Big! Big! The outside stairs—they're on it!" Bobo cried down, his voice harsh and thin with pain. "Big—"

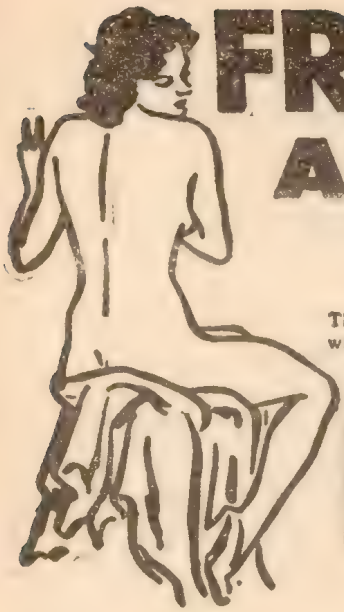
Killigan was already hurtling up the stairs as the night exploded with gunfire. Bobo's gun slashed muzzle-flame from a doorway toward the rear before he ducked back inside the room. "Look out, Big!" he yelled.

The outlaw flung himself prone on the second floor hall planking just in time. Lead whined over him. To his left, inside the room, was Bobo, hobbling on one leg, the other wounded. Behind his one-time pard, sprawled in the moonlight from a window, was the body of one of Onslow's outfit. Ahead, down the hall, a man crouched in the doorway giving onto the outside stairway. His gun winked brightly again.

Big came up, triggering as he closed on the attacker. His left gun recoiled in his hand the second time and the man tottered back from sight. Big was vaguely aware of Bobo's shout of warning again. As the outlaw half-turned, he saw the figure, another Onslow gunny, stepping from the doorway of a side room he had just passed. Big couldn't have swivelled his hoglegs around in time. Then—there was no need to.

Firing from one knee, the dependable Bobo drilled a hole in the side of the man's head, and Big rushed on to try to head off the sally up the

[*Turn To Page* 92]



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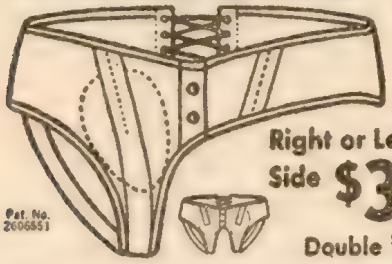

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outside stairs. But as he stepped into the back room, lead rained around him, sending plaster spattering from the wall in dozens of places. Part of the pack out on the ground were storming slugs through the stair door and the nearby window. To advance would be as good as digging a man's own grave.

HE REALIZED at once they were covering others working up the stairs to make a rush. If he gave them time to get set, they would come pouring in, too fast and too many for him. His eyes scoured the dim room for a piece of furniture to thrust into the open doorway. Vaguely he was aware that the woman, Julie Cloud, must have slipped out and gone over to the enemy too. He weighed the advantages of retreating, closing the door of the room, and awaiting them in the hall.

But if they once got inside the crossroads inn, it would only be a matter of time before the inevitable outcome. In a cold impersonal way, Big Killigan guessed that his time to die had come. He had to meet them at the doorway or— Dropping to hands and knees and forearms, he began to work forward with the slugs whistling just over him. He wished the shadows on the floor were thicker.

Beyond the sill of the doorway, he made out jumbled shadows. They were pressing up the stairway all right. Another few feet, another moment or two, and Killigan would have to rise and breast the leaden hail in the attempt to repulse them. He came to his knees, arming off his sombrero. Got one foot under him, cocked guns ready. Then he flung up and forward and around the edge of the door frame. And no lead from the ground below plowed into his tensed frame.

Instead, from directly above his head, twin livid lances of gun-flame arrowed down at the gunmen in the brush at the edge of the yard. Two men down there howled with pain. An-

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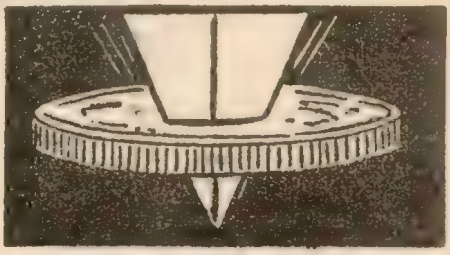

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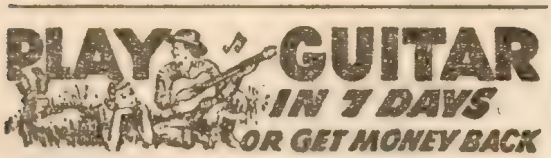

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other went bounding like a jack-rabbit across a moonlit patch toward a shed, clutching at his side. It was Bobo Rogers up on that roof, bellowing oaths as he rode those triggers over the edge from a prone position. Somehow, despite his injured leg, he had dragged himself up the ladder to the trap door and out on top.

Big Killigan thrust out the door onto the stairs as he realized he had far more than a hopeless prayer now. He slammed lead into the shoulder of one man a step from the top, missed a second but leaned forward to batter him down and sent him tumbling groundward with a slash of his gun barrel. A flying chunk of wood from the railing smacked the outlaw across the eyes, blinding him a moment. When his senses cleared, it was to feel a slug whistle an inch from his cheek and to see a bull of man charging up at him.

Big triggered his left gun. The hammer pinged on an empty shell. He flung it and missed. With the same hand, he lashed out. His rock-stiffened him in his tracks. Lowering his head, the outlaw charged forward on the small platform at the head of the stairs and butted the hombre full in the chest. The latter left his feet to go hurtling backward down the stairs and crash down two others who were trying to get up.

There was a heap of bellowing from around in the front. Then a man in the saddle came busting past the side of the cantina, yelling the warning. The rest of Killigan's bunch had come down the trail.

At the head of the stairs, Killigan himself glimpsed the bald head of Onslow, his old enemy, as he ducked into a stand of cottonwoods. But Big didn't even try a shot at him. For some time now, he had been belly-sick of gunplay, of any life that called for it. He spat drily as he watched Onslow's raiders flee back to the trees and hit the saddle leather to pull out. Under the

moon, up at the head of the column as they hit over a rise he picked out the red head of the woman, Julie...

THEY HAD brought Bobo Rogers down from the roof and tied up his bullet-gouged leg in the barroom. Everybody was having a drink. Big raised his glass to Bobo. "Somehow, pard, I always should have knowed *you'd* stick by me! I won't forgit this." A squat bow-legged gent with merry eyes came over. "Bobo, shake hands with Tuss Young. He usually operates down in the Mogollones. This is really his bunch—not mine."

Bobo shook hands with Tuss Young, a man wanted in three states and who, they said, would still look happy when they fitted him for a hempen necktie. "Howdy, Rogers. Big mentioned you more 'n once. Great gent, Big. He done a favor for one of my boys up in the Big House, so I had to pay him back somehow... Here, lemme git you another drink just to keep the pizen outa that laig, mistuh!"

Bobo looked up at Big, his old boss. "His outfit, eh... But I reckon you're riding with 'em, eh, Big?"

As he shook his head, Big's face grew grave. "Nope, amigo. Reckon I'd be welcome to... But behind bars a gent gits time for a heap of thinking. Onslow ain't worth my wrecking my life over... I'm heading out to some place they don't know me and starting a new life—a straight one."

Bobo's eyes crinkled up. "Big, just afore I got that letter from you—from Spike Hontell, mebbe—I bought a little outfit 'way down by Orson's Wells. On Broken Head Crick, it is. Got a coupla hundred head on it. And I been wondering who'd help me run it. Now, Big, if you was—"

Inside of a few moments, they were shaking on it and chuckling. " 'Course, Bobo, I'd only take wages till I'd saved enough to pay for a half share!"

"Consider your half paid an' over, Big!"

[*Turn Page*]

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"What do you mean? And, say—I sure guessed wrong," Big went on more soberly. "It was *two* of 'em—not just one—who sold me out that time. Julie *and* Dan Taley, by grab! I—"

Bobo shook his head. "Neither of 'em, Big... That—that's what I mean by your half of the cow outfit being more 'n paid for."

"Make sense, Bobo!"

" 'Member when you was sparking Julie in Red Dog that time—they was a cousin uh hers working at that same honkytonk. Sue, by name. A little blonde filly. I—I reckon, Big, I went sorta locoed over her. She said she'd run off with me and git hitched if I had a coupla thousand in my jeans. I'd been drinking real hard for days, B-Big. Didn't know rightly what I was doing. And—and—hells bells, Big—drill me if ya want—but one of them badge-packers carried the word to Onslow and he put up the dinero and—oh, dammit, Big, it was me who sent ya to jail!"

Big Killigan had gone stony-faced. Then, as he glanced around at the chattering men, his stern mouth eased. "Mebbe it was all for the best, Bobo... Mebbe in jail a gent gits sense—sense enough to quit the owl-hoot and settle down and work an outfit with an old pard like you! And I bet them other two was *trying* to sell me out anyways..."

Answers to "Know Your West"

1a
2a
3c
4b
5c
6b
7d
8d.

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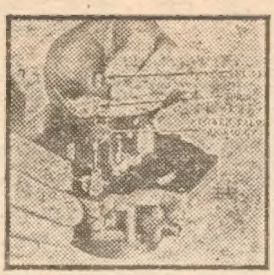

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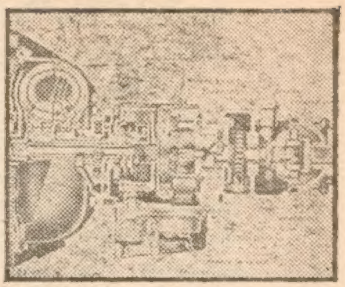

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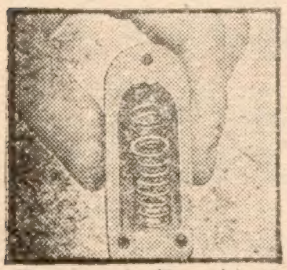

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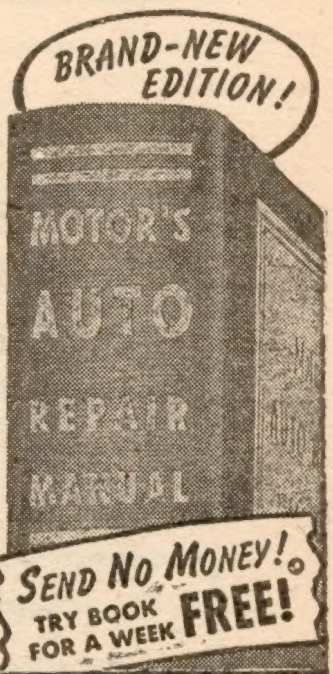

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GUNDOWN FOR A SADDLEBUM

(*continued from page 60*)

standing reward of five hundred each for any bank robber caught with the goods. You'll collect tomorrow! Or today, rather." He nodded to two of the citizens. "If you boys will help me over to the saloon, we'll have a look at that bank money. I suppose Hedy can sort of bandage Nelson and take care of him for a little while." He smiled down at them.

Hedy said, "I can take care of him longer than that." She grinned. "I heard him mention something about a stake a little while ago. He's going to have a question to ask me!"

They trooped outside and Andy cut his eyes around warily, "What if they don't find the money?"

"They'll find it," Hedy said. "Don't try to squirm out of it!"

Andy grinned. "Will you marry me, Hedy?"

"I'll think about it. I don't hardly know you yet!"

Andy ran his fingers through the soft curls. "You will," he said, "and you can start right now!"

"All right," Hedy said and her lips were warm against his own.

★

DEATH TUNNEL

(*continued from page 69*)

Slim pulled on his boots. "I need a drink. Who did it?"

"Floyd Coppersmet." Cliff gripped Slim by the front of the shirt. "*And you don't need a drink.* You're going to work for Josh Harris tomorrow, as a hostler. He needs a man. After you've shoveled manure for a month or so. I'll try and get Dan to deputize you. We need another deputy. Keep sober and I'll see that you get the job."

"And if I *don't* take the hostler job?"

Cliff grinned wickedly. "I'll get you drunk and cut you down to normal size."

Slim shrugged into his jacket. "By Gawd," he said quietly, "I believe you would. Come on, amigo! I'll sign the pledge. You win!"

★

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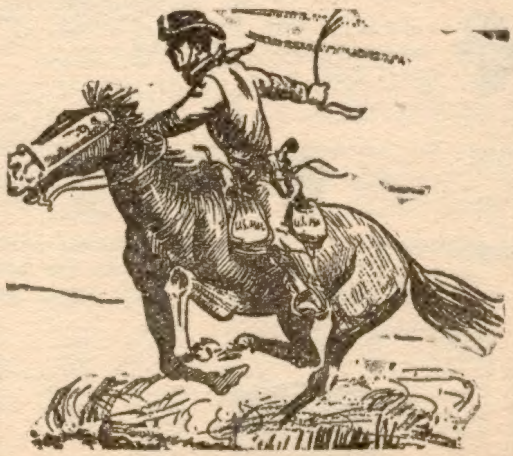

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